

# The Decline of the Choral Dance

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2003

**FE Note:** This is an excerpted version of Halmos' article which appears in *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society* (Dell 1962)

“One may judge of a King by the state of dancing during his reign.”

—Ancient Chinese maxim.

Artistic expression, even when dilettante, is one of the most satisfactory forms of objectifying and thus projecting inner tensions. The dance is undoubtedly the most ancient form of artistic expression; its unique position among the arts is guaranteed by more than mere seniority: as we have seen, the dance is essentially a cooperative art, an art of the group and not of the solitary individual. Though there are isolated examples of solo and couple dances among primitive peoples, they are not truly solo or couple performances; they presuppose the presence of singing and rhythmically tapping audiences who open the dance or who join in it later. In pre-cultural human society, dance must have been a universal form of expressing strong emotions collectively. Admittedly, there have been reports of some danceless peoples, yet so long as we accept testimonies from observers on animal-dances—e.g., Kohler's reports that his apes had danced too—we cannot be far wrong in concluding that the dance was a universal play-form in pre-cultural communities.

Primitive peoples dance for every occasion—birth, initiation, marriage, death, war and so on. Sometimes, the motive-force appears to be an overflow of vitality and joy, at other times it seems to issue from a craving for the dissolution of the self, or it may be linked with magical practices, e.g. rainmaking dances, hunting dances, or war dances.

Oesterley believed that “all dancing was originally religious and was performed for religious purposes.” He insisted that the dance was sacred in origin and that every other type of dance was derived from this original religious dance. Oesterley sensed that in the dance, the individual exerted self to reach beyond limited selfhood and merge with a larger reality. From the biological point of view, this larger reality is the totality of the species, and not much can be gained by saying that a communion with the community is merely a symbolization of a more significant and higher union, a union with God or with the essential principle of the universe. A social communion is complete and there is nothing in it which transcends the species.

Whether the ostensible purpose of these primitive dances is animistic-religious or magical-material, one constant feature in them is that they are group performances and not solo or couple acts. The main crises of human life are dramatized, couched in movement and shared by all who participate in the dance—alleviating the inflictions which inevitably follow from human existence, and enriching and ornamenting the joys which are incidental to life.

The choral dance is the physical manifestation of groupward drives. Whatever vital experience the primitive group has to face, its sharing by every member is made possible by the translation of that experience into rhythmic, muscular movements simultaneously executed by all. The speechless eloquence of posture and gesture supplemented the primitive vocabulary of prehistoric humanity and became a powerful medium of social intercourse.

The choral dance was not merely instrumental in securing group unity for ulterior purposes like a good harvest or the propitiation of evil demons. The groupward drives, the yearning for a tangible, physically manifested unity exist on their own account and suffuse the dance ritual whatever its ostensible purpose. In the choral dance, an inarticulate consensus and an absolute fraternity are reaffirmed from time to time, thus tightening group cohesion and conserving solidarity. In it, the individuals find assurance that they are not alone.

In some early civilizations, this potential of the choral dance was recognized, e.g. the training of the Greek soldier included the performance of martial dances. The dance “was a means of giving soldiers carriage, agility and health—and cultivating esprit de corps.” [Troy and Margaret Kinney.] John Martin interprets the meaning of primitive war dances in a similar way: “War dances not only constitute a popular form of entertainment but serve at the same time to crystallize group solidarity.

While Oesterley contended that the dance was originally nothing but a vehicle of religious mysticism, to us it appears that it was a medium of a paradigmatic experience which at its core was strictly social or communal.

The experience of a union, however, is not merely a gratification of social hunger, of the instinct of gregariousness, that is, of biosocial need. The satisfaction of this propensity is often accompanied by an auto-intoxication comparable only to sexual ecstasy which results in a temporary draining of the will from stubborn self-regard and in the gathering of reckless sacrificial emotions. Under these conditions, individual separateness disappears and phyllic unity is complete; and it is under these conditions that the group’s reality is supreme and exclusive. Through the choral dance, primitive people successfully achieved two objectives:

(a) the effective sharing of the burdens of conflicts and tensions, a sharing which reaffirmed and deepened the bonds of fellow-feeling;

(b) a catharsis through the rhythmic communal rapture which renewed and strengthened the individual.

The choral dance, therefore, was not only a socio-political vehicle of group solidarity but also a primitive method of group psychotherapy.

This second function is effectively portrayed by Curt Sachs: “Repressed powers are loosed and seek expression; an innate sense of rhythm orders them into lively harmony. Harmony deadens and dissipates the will, the dancer gives himself over to the supreme delights of play prescribed by custom, gives himself over to the exhilaration which carries him away from the monotony of everyday life, from palpable reality, from the sober facts of experience...In the ecstasy of the dance, we bridge the chasm between this and the other world...Captivated and entranced we burst earthly chains, and trembling, feel in tune with all the world.”

The chasm is that which exists between one individual and another. The transcendence of solitude has always appeared to mystics, poets, and philosophers as a communion with the Godhead, a surrender to the essential beauty of nature, or an acceptance of the universe. That which they experienced was a spiritualized, symbolical expression of their biosocial life.

Over and above the satisfaction of these biosocial needs and the individual therapeutic benefits, there were other reasons which made man seek for, and submit to, absolute collective loyalties. Individual survival, as much as group survival, dictated close cohesion: the small groups were surrounded by a hostile nature and by an often hostile rivalry of neighboring groups. When the tribes had been welded into states and empires and the preservation of security was no longer a daily anxiety, collective loyalties took on a more diffuse, anemic character—thickened only occasionally in emergencies. Consequently, a ritual of communal solidarity was no longer a routine practice. At the lower level of local groups, it lingered on for a while as a rare festivity to be held on a few specified occasions. It is for this reason that the choral dance reached its final form in the prehistoric era and has not changed its basic patterns ever since. Curt Sachs explains, “Strange as it may sound—since the Stone Age, the dance has taken on as little in the way of new forms as of new content. The history of the creative dance takes place in prehistory.”

The choral dance as the cultural form of a pre-cultural, biosocial practice survived for a long time. We find choral dances widely practiced as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These are, however, no longer the comprehensive experiences their pre-cultural predecessors used to be. Even so they continued to fulfill an integrative function in rural communities which were isolated and enslaved by feudal bondage. If there were real peasant communities under feudal lordship, these were made possible by integrative practices issuing from the community itself and not by the strictures imposed on the community by feudal rule. The latter could have created only compounds of serfs and not village communities.

Towards the end of the feudal era, the choral dance began to decline. For some time after the sixteenth century, choral dances and couple dances persisted together. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the spread of the waltz, the polka, and the Boston finally ended the popularity of the choral dances. During the intervening centuries, there were numerous pointers suggesting the presence of some kind of a transition in this process. The group is broken up into independent couples: the minuet, allemand, passepied, bourree, gigue are mixed dances with a strong choral framework; the cotillion-quadrille type of square dances represents the link between the choral and couple dances.

This later transition is already a historical and not a phylogenetic process; it is not our task to sketch the history of an art form but to examine whether it continues to answer the requirements of a biosocial need. It may be of some advantage, perhaps for the sake of bringing a contrast into high relief, to analyze the contemporary function of the dance. This contrast is presented to show the biosocial impoverishment of our species and complete our outline of the phylogenetic process.

Today, the dance is hardly ever the function of the group as a whole. Going to a dance very often means "going out," that is outside the group, preferably in twos. In the age of the tango (1900), the shimmy (1920), or the jitterbug (at the time of writing), the dance has been reduced to the role of being a medium of courtship, of sexual titillation, and of motor frenzy. The modern dance may serve sexual and matrimonial purposes well, but these purposes can hardly be described as communal. The couple arrive *en deux* and rarely join others among the dancers. The big city dance halls, and the dance floors of restaurants and night clubs are removed from the community, are outside the community. It is perhaps this character of such places which makes them eminently suitable for the purposes of present-day dancing.

Apart from the popular couple dances, we have spectacular stage dancing, ballet, etc.; but these belong to the split world of performers and audiences, and with these, we are not concerned here. After all, the hypertrophy of audiences is just another symptom of desocialization, a symptom which calls for specific study.

Today, the commercialization of dance activities has largely stabilized the hegemony of the isolate couple dance. The dance has ceased to be an opportunity when participation inertia can be overcome and when an ease in intimate contact can be developed. It is no longer an important formalizer of social skill, of manners, and it has become arid, businesslike or downright erotic, and non-social.

The dance today is a degenerated survival of an ancient group language, a language which was meant to be a medium of solidarity, self-expression, and release. In our times, it is an empty form at best, when it does not serve other ulterior ends.

The "taxi dance hall" represents a logical stage in the history of the dance. Here, commercialization is complete, and the beginnings of prostitution are apparent. The form of dance practiced in these places is a mechanical, overtly sexual pastime for thousands of solitary rejected men and a spurious source of income for hundreds of women, many of whom combine this work with prostitution. P.G. Cressey writes: "It is significant to note...that the more regular patron is seldom a member of a gang...the institution serves chiefly the distraught, the individualized and the egocentric." And: "There is little conversation. The patron may sit for hours beside others of his sex without conversing with them. The girls, likewise, when not dancing stand for long periods beside each other without talking." Cressey comes to the conclusion that, "In the last analysis the problem of the taxi dance hall can be regarded as the problem of the modern city," in which the criteria of life are "mobility, impersonality and anonymity."

There is no reliable material available on modern dancing habits in the home or in semi-public, exclusive places. Whatever the merits of these recreations may be, they are often delimited from the community by class, and are occasions for couple dancing. At best, these are harmless play-forms of the parlor game type or they are ceremonious, socialite shows in both of which the dance is merely an optional activity of individuals—not a communal ritual of all those present. The competitive features of social life dominate over the cooperative communal ones: physical attractiveness, wealth and rank, achievements of many kinds and so on are assessed and compared. Approval or rejection is then registered through the very media of dance etiquette.

The history of the choral dance shows a continuous decline which runs parallel with the long-drawn-out process of desocialization. The choral dance is not merely a symptom of group integration but also a uniquely ancient sustainer of biosocial group life. Sachs notes, "The decline of the choral dance is a cause and an indication of social development. The choral dance, communal dances, demand a compact social order: they require an association in

the dance which is something more than the current execution of a series of figures and movements.” The breaking up of rural communities by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of individualism stopped the choral dances and surrendered the floor, or the village green, to the couple dances. Huizinga went as far as to describe the suppression of the choral dance as a symptom of declining culture.

This view implies that the process we labeled “desocialization” and defined as the cultural limitation of man’s biosocial participation is in itself a manifestation of declining culture. On the other hand, we should stress that the perpetuation and further growth of a desocializing culture involves the inevitability of its own eventual destruction. Desocialization is decay which affects the entire social-cultural life of human communities; this decay has been speeded up during the last few centuries and contemporary culture is pregnant with catastrophe.

This process of desocialization is simultaneous with the process of cultural development; in other words, while there is culture there will always be frustrations imposed on man’s biosocial needs. Culture is not incompatible with a biosocially balanced life provided it comprises an awareness of biological sociality and the institutions through which this awareness can be expressed.

Naturally, the choral dance was by no means the only medium of biosocial contact in pre-cultural human society. It is the only known non-economic social form which, having existed pre-culturally, continued throughout the historically charted centuries.

On the pre-cultural level, the relatedness of the individual to his fellows was intimate and absolute. With the emergence of cultural forms, a certain measure of rigidity appears which grows at the expense of spontaneous and unreserved participation. The decline of the choral dances is a decline of biosocial life. First, it becomes formalized by culture; and second, is eliminated by a later culture which has become incompatible with it; the disappearance of the choral dances coincides with a historical event, a profound social-cultural change, i.e., the Industrial Revolution.

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