

**Fidelity instead of authenticity,  
8th European Conference of the IOV, Bucharest  
10-16/08/1999.  
by Prof. Alkis Raftis**

The history of the folk dance movement can be said to begin with the 20th century, even if folk ensembles have sporadically appeared earlier. The idea that dances of the peasants can be presented as spectacle to city people found fertile ground and enthusiastic supporters. Dance groups have not stopped multiplying, especially during the second half of the century, until today their number is estimated at 250.000 in the whole world.

A phenomenon lasting a hundred years, covering every corner of the earth, involving regularly dozens of millions of persons and reaching many more as spectators, has not yet been studied. Its history has not yet been written, its multiple repercussions on various spheres of social life (the arts, education, leisure etc.) have not been examined.

This vast phenomenon in duration as well as in spread is revealing on the way that persons, local agencies and governments see the past of every region. We have a lot to learn from the history of folk dance about the formation of collective self-knowledge, as well as on the construction of a local and national identity.

I use the term folk dance for the dance of ensembles whose primary object is giving performances before an audience, under the guidance of an instructor-choreographer. On the other hand, traditional dance has as main object the satisfaction of the dancers themselves, without guidance, with fellow villagers as only spectators. Traditional dance belongs to traditional society, that is the society of villages living in economic and cultural self-sufficiency before city manners invaded them. Since there is no traditional society today, traditional dance cannot exist but only as its derivative form, folk dance.

**I will deal now with only one of the countless aspects of this phenomenon, namely the quest of authenticity.**

**Throughout this century, in all countries, irrespective of political regime or social conditions, the notion of authenticity is present. In announcements of performances and in printed programs one finds invariably stressed that dance, music and costumes are authentic, that the ensemble is devoted to safeguarding a timeless heritage, that all its features are creations of the people, expressing its soul, its identity etc. Prizes in festivals are awarded according to authenticity (in festival terminology the opposite of authentic is stylized) although it is obvious that the judges themselves ignore what is authentic.**

**The inescapable rivalry among ensembles, instructors and dancers is also expressed in terms of authenticity, briefly: "Our dance is authentic, your dance is deformed".**

**Authenticity is almost an obsession of folk dancers everywhere, while it is absent from the areas of other dance forms (classic ballet, modern, ballroom dancing, disco, latin etc.). How can this particularity be explained? I will advance four answers to this question.**

**1. Folk dance is historical dance, it is an attempt to portray the past. The other dance genres - though they have their own long history - appear as dances of today, not as dances of yesterday. They satisfy present day needs of dancers and spectators, with present day creations. On the contrary, folk dance relies - successfully - on the argument that present day needs can be met with past creations.**

**2. There is a constant danger that the public might come to suspect that these dances are not authentic. Ensembles try to reassure spectators with recurring declarations of good faith - but they have no objective arguments, no proof. Performances are not based on field research with ethnographic methodology, no scientist assumes responsibility alongside the choreographer.**

**3. Reference to the authentic is a demand for justification and legitimization. Without connection to a point of reference, folk dance has no reason of existence on stage. Outside the stage, folk dance functions marvelously as recreation, education of even therapy. But when someone brings it on the stage as a spectacle he has to produce credentials of genuineness, otherwise folk dance will be taken as another kind of modern choreography - and a poor one at that.**

**4. Invoking the ancestors, the heritage, the national identity, the soul of the people, and claiming that all these authentic elements pertain the spectacle of folk dance ensembles, is nothing but a declaration of patriotism. Patriotism, when sincere, is guaranteed to produce emotion to the audience. Consequently, the discourse on authenticity functions as a corroborative, guiding the spectator in interpreting the program and drawing emotion from it. A declaration of patriotism also serves in securing subsidies from local or government sources.**

**While explaining the recurring reference to authenticity, the above four dimensions show that there could not be otherwise. The remaining dimension has to do with the meaning of the word itself.**

**Authenticity proper is the quality of being authentic. A painting by Edgar Degas is authentic only if made by the hands of the master, otherwise it is a copy or even a fake. The authentic work is unique. It cannot be more or less authentic, there is no such thing as a degree of authenticity, a work of art is either authentic or it is not.**

**Which dance is authentic then when it comes to folk ensembles? It can only be traditional dance, the one danced by their great grandfathers when they could still elaborate their own dances, rather than copy city ones. In Europe that was the case until 50-150 years ago, according to the region.**

**We cannot make the same costumes as then, even when we know how they looked like. No musician can play exactly as then, because his ear has been "contaminated" by the tempered scale he hears everywhere. Even if we find traditional costumes and musicians for our ensembles, we should find**

**dancers of that time. Dancers who the same bodies, mental attributes, way of life, dancers not knowing dances other than the ones from their village.**

**The prototype in our case is not unique, since dances, music and costumes changed with time then, they only changed in a much slower pace than today. Even if we choose a particular year as point of reference, it would be impossible to reproduce the dance scene exactly, in order to become authentic.**

**For this reason we should use the term fidelity instead of authenticity. Fidelity expresses the degree of approaching a marginal reality. In music it is commonly known that a sound cannot be recorded and reproduced without some losses, there is low fidelity and high fidelity, but absolute fidelity is impossible. Let us accept the same in folk dance: absolute fidelity to the authentic traditional dance is impossible.**

**By adopting the term fidelity, there is hope that ensembles will enter a process of increasing the fidelity of their performances. They only have to deviate from the Stalinist dance of the Moisseief school that has done so much harm during the last 50 years. It is a kind of dance that although it belongs to ballet - an purely bourgeois dance form - is advertised hypocritically as popular dance. The people of the villages in every country have expressed themselves only through their own dance creations.**

**Without diminishing the charm of their spectacle, ensembles can turn to the sources (old people and old books) in order to approach the traditional prototype. If dance instructors and choreographers cooperate with dance ethnographers and historians folk dance will enter a new phase of boom.**

**Alkis Raftis**

[www.grdance.org](http://www.grdance.org)

**Alkis Raftis was born in Athens in 1942. He is a graduate of four universities in Athens and Paris, and he speaks six languages. He has taught in four**

**universities and lectured in many others. He has authored a dozen books on dance and culture. He is president of the national Greek Dances Theater “Dora Stratou”, president of the Greek Section of the International Organization of Folk Art and member of the International Dance Council.**