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**THE DANCING HISTORY COLLECTION**

**VOLUME 1**

**THE DANCING HISTORY COLLECTION,  
VOLUME 1**

**CULTURAL DANCES, PART I**

**THE FIRST IN A FOUR PART SERIES:**

Cultural Dances, Part I  
Cultural Dances, Part II  
Dances from Royal Courts and Ballets  
Modern and Postmodern Dances

**Jill Beck**

*University of California, Irvine, USA*

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## ***Dedication***

*This book is dedicated in loving memory of Indrani,  
whose knowledge, grace and beauty brought lasting inspiration  
to her students and colleagues at The Juilliard School.*

## Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of many wonderful experts and advisors in the production of this text.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

**The Dancing History Collection** provides new source materials for inquiry in dance history and culture, using reconstruction as a methodology for research. The premise of the series is that reconstruction is a “body and motion-utilizing research strategy”<sup>1</sup> that can yield unique insights into the nature of dances. New understanding can be gained by reconstructing dances, entering them, and identifying what the experience of the dances entails.

The emphasis of the **Collection** is to enable the performance of representative movement from different places and times, to deepen dance research practice that has relied heavily on viewing dances. This reconstruction and performance emphasis is the origin of the active “Dancing History” of the series title. Volumes I and II are comprised of dances from world cultures, documented in Labanotation scores that can, in tandem with the articles that accompany them, serve as the basis for reconstruction, analysis, and performance. Volume III begins to focus more on Western dance history by presenting dances from royal courts and ballets; Volume IV contains dances from the modern and postmodern traditions. Original Labanotation scores in each volume document six to fourteen dances that have not previously been available in dance score format for reconstruction. Word notes and photographs are used to increase the accuracy of the scores in capturing stylistic details of the dances, while keeping the legibility quotient of the scores high. Contextual information from expert authorities has been researched and compiled, to provide the additional background on which critical and interpretive judgments can be based.

This series crystallized over an extended period of research in reconstruction. In the years 1992-1999, the author collaborated with a number of historical and cultural experts on master classes, reconstructions of dances for study and performance, the creation of dance notation scores, and other teaching and research. **The Dancing History Collection** presents the results of these research partnerships, which were formed with the following goals:

### **The study of Dance History through performance**

The history of dance is frequently introduced through the viewing and analysis of filmed and videotaped performances. While critical viewing is an extremely valuable component of historical dance study, it is equally important to undertake new performance study, i.e. actual physical experience with dances from different times and places. The combination of the two approaches adds strength to each: viewing of performances by members of the culture or experts; and immersion in the dances as an alternative way to develop insight and understanding.

Objections can be raised about the quality of performance, and therefore the level of understanding that it is feasible to achieve from dancers whose backgrounds may be in very different movement styles than those under reconstruction and study. Yet it is perhaps more problematic to expect dancers to generate precise historical and cultural knowledge exclusively from visual and textual information. Dances performed even in approximation produce in the dancers realizations of: motivation; physical coordination requirements of the movement; music and dance relationships; resulting emotional reactions; social relationships; uses of space; choreographic preferences for different parts of the body; and ways in which the communication of meaning--theme, character, idea, belief-- can be physicalized.

The research approach of **The Dancing History Collection** is that dance history should engage the objects of its investigation actively, directly, and internally, by reconstructing and performing dances, as well as viewing them. This approach utilizes dance notation as documentation, oral interviews to establish context, and interpretation and analysis of the performing experience as means of generating new knowledge.

### **The use of dance notation as documentation**

Dance notation can produce valuable source materials for dance history study through the documentation of choreography. This series presents dozens of dances in Labanotation, with photos and word notes to increase accessibility. By applying dance notation to the documentation of dance history, we enlarge the existing dance literature to which research access through reconstruction is unrestricted.

Tight partnering of the two fields of dance history and notation links dance literacy, which is advocated by postsecondary dance degree programs, with a literature widely available for reading, reconstruction and research.

### **The use of oral interviews to establish authenticity and context**

Each of the chapters in this four-volume series includes factual information, descriptions, and an intra-cultural perspective derived from oral interviews of cultural, historical, or stylistic experts. Since so much of the information that defines dances, and perpetuates their identity, continues to be transmitted through oral traditions, expert knowledge is a primary resource from which to construct contextual understanding and provide more reliable versions of each dance. This ethnographic method may be especially relevant regarding cultures whose dances are in the early stages of documentation, and where the best grasp of choreographic form and intent may reside in the mind of an authority. In chapters in this series for which an individual expert provided lengthy, detailed interviews, that individual is listed as co-author.

The knowledge of dance experts is presented with fidelity to the priorities they articulated, and the terminology they used in their oral interviews. Their emphasis and commentary should enable more sensitive reconstructions from the notated scores.

## **Interpretation as a means of generating new knowledge**

Based on the experience of reconstructing the dances, the analysis of their notated scores, their performance, and the assimilation of ethnographic data from oral interviews, it is possible to develop new interpretations about the meaning of historical and cultural dances. In each chapter, there is some synthesis of these different research foci, and interpretations are suggested that may generate new understanding of the nature of individual dances, dance genres, or cultural aesthetics.

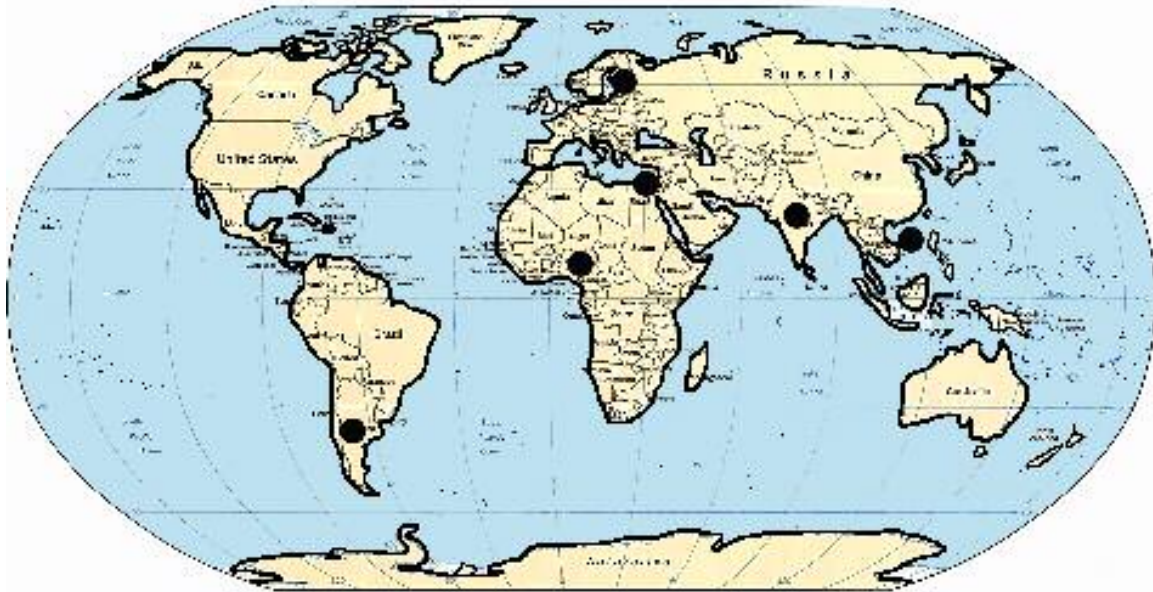
Further conjecture about meaning should be one of the goals of readers of this series. The practices of score reading, reconstruction, contextual research, and performance can inspire and support interpretive theory, broadening discourse in dance history.

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<sup>1</sup>Tomko, Linda J. "Beyond Notation." International Encyclopedia of Dance. Volume 5. (page 329), 1998 ed.

## INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 1

Volume I of **The Dancing History Collection**: Cultural Dances, Part 1 contains nine dances from six countries: Israel; Vietnam; India; Nigeria; Argentina and Finland. The selection of these countries was made in part to provide the opportunity to reconstruct dances from cultures with wide geographic dispersion. As the map below illustrates, these cultures reach from South America to Scandinavia, Western Africa, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent, and Southeast Asia.



These dances also offer broad variety in their dates of origin and the historical length of the traditions that precede them. While *Krishna Steals the Buttersweets* in the Bharata Natya style draws on 2000 years of classical Indian dance tradition, the four dances from Israel are rather recently created, within the last 35 years. *Olokun* from Nigeria is a very contemporary arrangement of movements that have a long history of use in ritual performance. The dances from these three cultures, however, are all spoken of as “traditional.” Whether newly and intentionally created, or whether subject to thousands of years of evolution and protection, the dances are seen by their societies as representing something profoundly defining about their cultures, and as affirming beliefs or values that are central to their cultural continuity.

The concept of “tradition” raises the question of the nature of the beliefs or values that are central to the dances in this volume. The nine dances were created to serve many different principles and purposes, ranging from social (Argentina, Finland), to socio-political (Israel), to religious (Nigeria and India), to commemorative and celebratory (Vietnam). Yet even dances that share a basic principle, for example that dance is an important means of social interaction, can be seen in reconstruction to differ greatly in the techniques used to implement the goal. In *Viva Jujuy!* from Argentina, dancers



interact with a single partner at a time in a subdued and languid manner, and always with the intermediary device of a small scarf. Actual physical contact is restricted to a small, formal embrace as the dance concludes. By contrast, *Sakkijarvi Sappu* from Finland mixes every member of the group with every other, in spinning figures that are varied and slightly dizzying. Physical contact in the dance begins with hand holds, then progresses to the men forming a circle of entwined arms onto which the women are lifted. In principle, both of these dances share a common goal of providing social experiences for a group or community. In compositional techniques, however, they are radically different. The reconstruction methodology differentiates between these social dances by calling attention to their compositional techniques and to the quality of the social experience that the dances effect in their participants. *Viva Jujuy!* maintains physical distance and emotional equilibrium, while *Sakkijarvi Sappu* induces breathless comradeship through increasing physical proximity.

The Nigerian and Indian dances are another pair of dances that have great points of similarity and divergence. These dances, broadly speaking, are both communications of religious belief, including the representation of attributes of a deity. *Olokun* represents aspects of the Yoruban goddess, Olokun, with general choreographic references to water, fertility, and parenting. *Krishna Steals the Buttersweets* tells a more literal story of the god Krishna at play, stealing and consuming the delicious sweets of the village milkmaids. Both dances probe the natures of deities central to their culture's cosmology. However, *Olokun* is a fast, strenuous dance in which performers can become emotionally, intellectually and physically immersed. The imagined partner in the dance is Olokun herself, with whom the dancers hope to commune by deepening their concentration and by representing more and more of the goddess's qualities. The dance was choreographed for the spiritual revitalization of its participants, and the principal audience consideration was for the deity herself. *Krishna Steals the Buttersweets* was conceived differently, not so much as an empathic physical experience, but as outward-directed, non-verbal communication of a Hindu story for an audience that lacked books. Perhaps as a result of this, the Indian dance is less strenuous, with the majority of the choreography focusing on the hands and face as expressive tools in storytelling. The reconstruction methodology can clarify approaches different cultures have taken to choreography that is based on religious belief. *Olokun* offers a highly internalized experience; *Krishna Steals the Buttersweets* demands presentational technique that is conscious of the need to communicate to an audience.

Some of the dances offer the possibility to compare the use of props. *Viva Jujuy!* from Argentina employs a small scarf as a choreographic and social device. The scarf is waved in lazy figure-eight shapes that decorate the dance and enhance its overall circularity. But it is also a way for partners to reach out to each other and enliven the space between them. In *Viva Jujuy!*, use of the scarf as prop is largely abstract. In the Vietnamese dance *Ganh Lua*, conical straw hats are used in a more representational way, to create images of baskets, threshing screens, and the sun crossing the sky, among others. These images range from the literal and easily recognized (baskets) to the more metaphorical and suggestive (the sun). The various uses of the hat are all meant to convey meaning, but they also add choreographic interest, extending the lines and spatial paths of the body.

The reconstruction methodology raises the issue of the different purposes for which props are conceived, affecting our performance (the intention with which we move or show objects) and viewing (by offering us different examples of the choreographic value or meaning props add to a dance).

Reconstructions of the dances reveal how they work with variables such as: the design of space; level of movement difficulty; involvement of different parts of the body; music/dance relationships; and the use of individual dancers versus pairs of dancers, or groups made of many pairs or individuals. These variables (and others) offer useful categories for comparative analysis. For example, the Israeli dances establish a spatial formation at the beginning (generally a circle or line) that stays fairly constant throughout. In contrast, the Vietnamese and Finnish dances emphasize changing patterns, keeping traveling steps simple in favor of complex spatial “figures.” *Viva Jujuy!* from Argentina is between these two extremes, with a constant spatial design (the circle) that is manipulated to produce half-circles, spirals, and circles around one’s self or one’s partner.

The dances span a wide range of levels of movement difficulty. *Viva Jujuy!* from Argentina is the simplest and can be performed comfortably by non-dance specialists. The Vietnamese dance also has a low level of movement difficulty. The Israeli dances and the *Sakkijarvi Sappu* from Finland offer more movement challenges, in step and partnering respectively, and probably qualify as moderately difficult. At the upper end of the scale of difficulty is *Krishna Steals the Buttersweets*, which is traditionally danced by a professional class of performer. It entails intricate coordination among parts of the body, and choreography for the hands and head to which many Western performers will be less accustomed. *Olokun* is also a dance with a high level of movement difficulty, due to movement isolations in many parts of the body, requiring both control and coordination.

Most of the dances feature very close relationships between dance and music. Perhaps the extreme example of this is *Olokun*, which maintains a steady physicalization of the beat in some part of the body in 21 of its 23 movement motifs. The lead drummer, playing the Talking Drum, would in a traditional Nigerian setting be the determining factor in much of the realization of the dance--its tempi, nuances of expression, and transitions to next sequences. Music and dance rarely achieve as tight a relationship. A comparison of this African dance can be made with the Israeli dances, which were all choreographed to specific songs or pieces of music. However, in *Mi Li Yiten*, movement and music diverge and cross each other’s phrasing. In Volume I, this is the dance with the loosest connection between its movement and music.

The following matrix is offered to help the reader understand the performers and audience for each dance.

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>DANCES</b>	<b>THE CHOREOGRAPHIC UNIT IS:</b>	<b>THE DANCE IS INTENDED FOR:</b>
Israel	<i>Simkhu Na</i> <i>Hora Khedera</i> <i>Mi Li Yiten</i> <i>Debka Kafrit</i>	Pairs in a group Individuals in a group Pairs in a group Individuals in a group	The community of participants The community of participants The community of participants The community of participants
Vietnam	<i>Ganh Lua</i>	Individuals in a group with some partner work	The community of participants
India	<i>Krishna Steals the Buttersweets</i>	An individual, or a small group in strict unison	An audience
Nigeria	<i>Olokun</i>	Individuals (the group is secondary)	The individual participants, viewers, the deity Olokun
Argentina	<i>Viva Jujuy!</i>	Pairs (the group is secondary)	The community of participants
Finland	<i>Sakkijarvi Sappu</i>	Four pairs in a group	The community of participants