

Reality. Not Fantasy. The Connection to the Traditional Source in a Hungarian Folk Dance Camp in the USA.

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About forty years ago in the Niagara Peninsula I saw a solo "Hungarian" dance performed by a short-skirted, sequined girl who did cartwheels to a recording of a Brahms' Hungarian Dance. In sharp contrast, in 2002 at the Hungarian Folk Dance and Music Symposium in rural Pennsylvania, I saw a barn full of the camp's participants dancing the authentic dances of an obscure Hungarian village in Slovakia to the music of an amazing revival band.

The difference in attitudes to tradition could hardly be greater. The first example provides an excellent instance of fantasy at work. The sequined girl's dance was an imaginary projection, framed in "national" terms. The second example comes much closer to the reality of authentic, village tradition.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the connection of the aforementioned Symposium participants to the source of their dance and music traditions. (Because this camp was the tip of the iceberg for a large network of dancers and musicians on the east coast of the USA and Canada, I was confident that their attitudes would be reflective of a broader movement.) To expedite my investigation I constructed a questionnaire that dealt with several aspects from identity to practice, performing, music and costuming. (For the text of the questionnaire see the Appendix to this paper.) But most of all, I was interested in the campers' connection to the source of their dance. In other words, in their views on authenticity. The questionnaire was favourably received and elicited 40 responses.

Authenticity is not an easy topic. For example, the connection to authenticity seems to present a substantial problem for many Americans, especially for academics concerned with folk traditions.

Defining authenticity is indeed a challenge. What is authentic tradition? What is the source of authenticity? Which segment or stratum of society? Which period of history? There are academics who claim that authenticity in folk traditions is not only undefinable, perhaps it doesn't even exist. I happen to have a different point of view, because I come from a different tradition, the tradition of Hungarian folkdance research.

Hungarian folkdance experts have concerned themselves intensely with authenticity. Unlike the somewhat self-indulgent, intellectualising attitude of many Western academics, Hungarian researchers have a relatively no-nonsense approach to the subject. Their confidence comes from the fortunate historical circumstances that enabled them to study folkdance in its working environment, the village community, which was still vibrant until recent times in parts of Transylvania and within living memory even in Hungary. Their work is hallmarked by rigorous, disciplined field research and an ability to identify with village traditions as part of their own past. Their attitude has some of the flavour and fervour of the Russian *narodnik* movement. Among the best of the Hungarian researchers there is a strong tendency towards an attitude of loving care, a feeling of responsibility for these traditions. György Martin formulated it well:

The first goal should be a thorough understanding and knowledge of traditional art. What to do with it, how to use it, will emerge out of this process. Without that initial identification, without that deep knowledge, artistic aspirations in the field of folkdance have often resulted in purposelessness and stylistic superficiality which, in turn, has deepened the prevailing attitude of irresponsibility towards traditional art.²

It is with this point of view in mind that I will examine the campers' responses.

Personal Statistics, Background, Experience

The first part of the questionnaire asked for personal information to help establish a basic statistical snapshot of the camp. In addition, one of my goals was to examine the respondents' concept of personal identity.

There were only 15 males among the 40 respondents. The explanation for the disproportionate number of responses from female dancers is only partly to be found in the male reluctance to fill out questionnaires. There were, in fact, fewer male than female dancers at the camp. Generally speaking, in the American milieu guys just don't dance, and this cultural non-validation probably has a lot to do with the inequality of male attendance at the Symposium.

Most of the respondents had been involved with their dance form for many years. In fact, only 16 respondents had less than 10 years of experience. Despite this, only one respondent listed herself as a professional dancer. This may be a function of the fact that in the Hungarian folk dance movement amateur dance groups are the norm and, of course, *táncház*-style dancing is done primarily for its own enjoyment.

Interesting facts came to light in answer to the question "What is your ethnic origin?" More than half (23 of 40) of the respondents described their ethnic origin as Hungarian or partly Hungarian. Evidently the camp is not primarily an American phenomenon. Most respondents gave a specific description of their ethnicity, many citing descent from two or more national origins. Even when only one ethnic origin was given, the respondents tended to be specific: 16 of the 19 citing their origin as Hungarian or Transylvanian or, for example, not just Jewish but Ashkenazi.

This degree of specificity is somewhat unusual in the USA where the expected standard answer to the question of ethnicity is a vast generalization such as "Caucasian." Clearly there was a higher than average awareness of roots or belonging among the camp participants.

Primary Motivation

I asked dancers to list their main motivations for getting involved with their chosen form of dance. I offered a list of possibilities plus space for a write-in "other" choice. Here is what their choices looked like:

Main Motivation	
Recreational/Social	34
Performing	8
Health/ Exercise	10
Teaching	6
Other	10

We can safely assume that it is easier to choose some of the offered possibilities than to write in one's own choice. In that light, the spontaneously supplied answers may be considered disproportionately more important. These "other" answers had to do with Cultural Preservation/Folklore (3 mentions) and Love of /Addiction to Folkdance (2 mentions).

The write-in answers seem to point to these respondents' primary motivation being the need to preserve tradition.

History of Involvement

I was interested in finding out how and from what sources the dancers learned their material. Respondents listed professional instructors, camps and workshops as their first choice. "Informally/From Friends" ranked second as a learning source, with 20 mentions. Learning from videos came next. Learning from the original source, the traditional community or original informants was also listed by some camp respondents, attesting to the highly developed connection to authenticity among some of the Symposium participants. Among the large number of "other " responses there was a wide variety, including "learned from relatives".

The answers regarding time spent dancing per week indicated that all respondents danced less than 10 hours per week. As to how this time was spent, practicing topped the list. Some respondents spent more time teaching than performing. Dancing with friends was also important for Symposium participants.

The picture that emerges tends to show that preserving or passing on tradition has a high priority for some of the respondents. We can also see the influence of the *táncház* movement here in the emphasis on dancing with friends.³

Connection to Source

I asked the question "Have you ever visited the country or countries that are the source of the dances you do?" The majority of the respondents answered yes. Based on this, one could speculate that, for people involved in Hungarian dance, it probably serves as some sort of bridge to broader, real, personal contact with that culture.

Visiting the land of one's ancestors is one thing. Does it lead to a deeper immersion in the chosen tradition? I wanted to know how many of the respondents had had an opportunity to experience their art form in an authentic, original community setting. It was a complex question because "authentic setting" is a complicated issue. And I got a complex set of answers. To simplify and make sense of them I generally divided them into "yes" and "no". In the "yes" column I included what I call secondary events such as seeing traditional village dancers or musicians in a camp or on stage. In the "no" column I decided to also include having watched the art form on video or having seen stage shows of various touring professional and national companies.

Here's what the chart looked like:

Yes	Authentic setting	12
	Secondary setting	11
No	Straight no	12
	On video	3
	In show	2

One could conclude that among the camp respondents there was a general feeling that a source of tradition exists and it is of value to be connected to it.

Styles, Variants, Preferences

The respondents' choices in listing the types of dance with which they are involved may be reflective of the preferences of a larger movement. I believe that no such preference measurement has ever been attempted before. This may be the primary value of this part of the survey.

To make the results of the survey meaningful, I will attempt to provide a brief background of the basic historical and ethnographic contexts of Hungarian folkdance.

Hungarian folkdance is generally classified two ways.⁴ The first is as historical types of dance, for example Old Style (girls' circle dances, weapons dances, *ugrós* or jumping dances, etc.) or New Style (*verbunk* and *csárdás*). The second way is as geographical or regional styles or dance dialects. Because virtually all the respondents chose to state their

preferences in this latter way, (the reasons for this are too complex to examine here) it may be useful to provide further information about Hungarian regional dance dialects. Ethnographers divide Hungarian (or, rather, Carpathian Basin) dance styles into three large regional dialects: Transdanubian (west of the Danube), Central (roughly from the Danube east to Transylvania), and finally, Transylvanian.

Each of these large dialects can be further subdivided into smaller regional styles. These can be substantially and visibly different in Transylvania even from one district to the next, whereas in Hungary proper, the regional differences are more subtle. The current tendency of research and teaching in Hungarian folkdance is increasingly micro-centric. So, for example, the Mezőség sub-dialect of the Transylvanian dialect is now being analyzed village by village and, to some extent, by individual dancer.

With this background as a guide, we may better understand the responses to the question "What kinds/styles, regional variants are you involved with." (To reflect the order of preference requested in the questionnaire, I gave a weighting of three for a first choice, two for a second and third choice and one for subsequent entries.)

Transylvanian dialects turned out to be the overwhelming favourites of Symposium respondents. Within Transylvania the Mezőség sub-dialect got the largest number of mentions and included individual villages like Bonchida, Magyarpalatka and Mezőkeszü. The region of Kalotaszeg got the second largest score including specific mentions for the village of Méra. The generic term Transylvanian/*erdélyi* came third and included mentions for Romanian dances. The Székely sub-dialect came next with a larger than usual village or district list: Vajdaszentivány, the Sóvidék district, Mezőkölpény, the Nyárádmente district and Maros-sárpatak. The Küküllőmente/Délmezőség sub-dialect was next with citations that included Gypsy dances from Szászcsovás and Hungarian dances from Magyarszentbenedek and Lőrincréve. Finally, the dances of Gyimes, a small and rather distinct group of Csángó villages in Eastern Transylvania, were also listed.

What is surprising here is the richness of village-specific mentions. In contrast, the dances belonging to the Central dialect were mainly cited not as village styles but as regional sub-dialects. Dances from the region of Szatmár, for example, were the favourites. The district of Gömör in Slovakia was mentioned next most often. Palóc (a common designation of one of Hungary's northern peoples) was also cited, as was

the Délalföld area. Only one specific village was mentioned, that being Magyarböd in eastern Slovakia, the source of one of the dialects taught at the camp that year. A generic *felvidéki* (upland) label garnered some mentions, as did the district of Zemplén in Slovakia.

A similar pattern applied to the Transdanubian regional dialect. In fact, here the winner was the label *dunántuli* (meaning Transdanubian). The Somogy county sub-dialect came second. The Rábaköz district was next and then the village of Kalocsa.⁵ The village of Madocsa got one mention.

There were very few citations outside these three large dialects: Moldvai (the Romanian-style dances of Hungarian Csángó villagers east of Transylvania) got three mentions. There were several mentions of "all" or "a wide variety of dialects." And finally Palotás, the set-pattern dance artificially created or, rather, reconstructed for the balls and celebrations of the Hungarian gentry, got one mention.

Summing up, the choices among the respondents at the Symposium were almost exclusively regional dialects of Carpathian basin folk-dances, with a pronounced preference for Transylvanian styles and a surprising number of specific, single-village mentions.

This provides important and interesting insights about the respondents' attitudes to authenticity.

Take the question of site-specific or village-specific mentions. Bearing in mind that dance is a community-based culture, in the pre-modern world one would naturally expect to find at least nuances of difference between the dances of any given village and its closest neighbour. One could also expect the differences to intensify with distance. Given also that throughout history most of the world has been characterized by a mixing of cultures rather than by vast monocultural areas, the picture we get is one of regional rather than ethnic differences. In light of this, reference to dances in national terms is largely inappropriate. So, for example, the Symposium respondent who claims to be doing Hungarian dances from Transylvania should be aware that these dances resemble the local Romanian dances a lot more than they do dances from Hungary proper. Conversely, of course. Romanian dances from Transylvania are a lot closer to Hungarian dances from Transylvania than they are to Romanian dances from, say, Oltenia. In this sense, the respondents' village or site-specific mentions (rather than a "national" designation of dances) points to a well-developed understanding of the concept of

authenticity in folk dance. At the same time, it shows a certain connectedness to the source communities.

Connection to Music

Because music and dance are inextricably connected, my thesis was that authenticity in dance could also be profitably elucidated by the dancers' connection to music. The first question I asked had to do with direct musical experience. "Do you play a musical instrument?" The camp respondents were evenly divided (20 yes, 20 no). For those who played, the violin was the most popular instrument (8). The next question "What kind of music do you normally dance to: live or recorded?" received 11 "live" and 30 "recorded" answers, suggesting a lack of availability of live music in the movement. When it comes to preference, all the camp respondents said they would prefer to dance to live music. One could speculate that the *táncház* movement has brought Hungarian dancers closer to an appreciation of the pleasures of interaction between dancer and musician.

The music portion of the questionnaire also asked respondents about the styles of music they preferred as well as their favourite musicians or musical groups. Music from Kalotaszeg was the winner with seven mentions, followed by the generic "Transylvanian" designation with six votes. Music from the village of Magyarpalatka was third with five mentions while the generic term "Hungarian" scored four votes.

When it came to naming their favourite musicians or groups, the camp respondents mentioned exclusively revival groups working only with authentic acoustic instruments in regional or village styles, or actual village bands. Thus, of the most popular four groups cited, two are revival bands (Tükrös and Ökrös) and two are village bands (the band from Szászcsávás and the band from Magyarpalatka).

Other popular revival bands receiving multiple mentions were Téka, Muzsikás, Dűvő and Csík. The grand old *primás* or fiddler from Kalotaszeg, Sándor Fodor "Neti" received five mentions. The only band from this side of the Atlantic to receive votes was Életfa from New York, the standard backup band at Symposium who often plays on the East coast *táncház* circuit.

This degree of sophistication in appreciating authentic music is no accident. Part of the answer lies in the fact that Kálmán Magyar, the

organiser of Symposium, regularly brings the best revival bands from Hungary and has even featured the band from Szászcsovás, giving the campers a keen appreciation for village music.

Costumes

I included a section on costuming in the questionnaire, thinking that not only was it really important for some dancers but that it also provided another possible way to shed light on the connection to authenticity.

The initial question had to do with whether the dancers considered tradition when dressing for practice. This did not seem to be an important consideration for respondents.

When it comes to dressing for performance the picture changes. The vast majority of camp respondents said they wore traditional folk costumes for performance.

Part of the explanation lies in the fact that a lot of Hungarian dancers belong to performing groups, where being on stage in appropriate costumes is generally the rule.

As to how many costumes the dancers have, the majority own one to four but nine in the camp said they own no costumes. Part of the seeming 'disconnect' between the respondents not owning costumes but performing in them can be explained by the fact that it is very often the performing groups, not the dancers, who own the costumes.

The last question on costumes had to do with how the dancers obtained them. The choices were: 1, bought them from original wearers (20 mentions); 2, bought from commercial sources (14 mentions); 3, a mix of the above two (12 mentions); 4, sewed them yourself from traditional patterns (7 mentions); 5, made them up using your own imagination (1 mention).

The recognition that authenticity is important shows up in costuming as well. The fact that many costumes were bought from original wearers attests also to the camp participants' substantial connectedness to the traditional source communities.

Tradition, Transmission and Authenticity

This part of the questionnaire was at the heart of my investigation. I wanted to discover how the dancers thought of tradition, what was their

connection to it, what was their concept of authenticity or, more specifically, how they viewed their own dancing in relation to "authentic" tradition.

This section began gently with the question "Do you see your dancing as a continuation of an older cultural tradition?" 25 respondents answered "yes", ten "partly" and five "no".

"How important is it to maintain or foster this tradition?" was the next question. 34 respondents said "very" and six answered "somewhat". Measuring how this maintenance should be achieved was the intent of the next question. "Are you involved in the maintenance of this tradition?" The primary form of involvement for the respondents was teaching (17 responses).

Other ways of involvement cited included a range of support activities: organizing camps, community events, sponsoring performances, etc. (4 responses), doing field research (2 responses) and finally, dancing or learning the dance (4 responses).

There seemed to be a feeling among some of the respondents that for a tradition to be maintained it is enough that they perform or just dance or merely learn the material. It could be the subject of speculation that the "learning it is enough" attitude could be an outsider's viewpoint, since learning could be viewed as the door into a tradition or the key to belonging. For those who already consider themselves part of a culture, on the other hand, the vital question becomes maintenance or preservation, hence the importance of teaching.

In the next question I set up a spectrum with innovation at one end and tradition at the other. I was interested in where the respondents would place themselves on this spectrum.

Five of the respondents chose "not applicable" as the answer. Plotting the rest of the responses yields a curve that tends steadily towards tradition. One could conclude that the goal for respondents is to be as close to tradition as possible.

The next question was "Is your dancing authentic?" (I gave a dictionary definition of authentic.) The distribution of the answers was 11 "yes", 26 "somewhat" and 2 "no". The relatively low number of "yes" responses to this question presents one of the anomalies in the survey. The answer probably lies in the heightened realization among some of these respondents of what it means to be authentic and, therefore, the respondents' reluctance to equate themselves with it. (In fact, most of the

"yes" responses came from people with relatively little experience or exposure to authentic tradition.)

The reality of the moment may be different from the ultimate goal. That is why the next question dealt with whether the respondent thought it was important to be authentic. 29 said "very", while nine answered "somewhat" and none said "no".

The final question was purposefully contentious. I proposed: "To be really authentic, you have to be from the place the dance is from." Two respondents agreed strongly, while 15 agreed somewhat and 13 disagreed, while eight disagreed strongly. I found the answers rather surprising. I had expected more disagreement. After all, American culture includes an aspect that says: "you can be anything you want to be; you can do anything you put your mind to." Among those who agreed with the question, there were more with experience, especially with first hand experience. Agreement was also not primarily a function of origin. The issue gels around Roma dances with several comments about having to be gypsy to be really authentic in dancing gypsy dances. Others commented on the fact that being a descendant of the source community is no assurance of authenticity, or that an informed non-native can be more authentic than an uninformed native.

Conclusion

My primary goal in this survey was to examine the connection to authenticity in the camp. Moreover, as I pointed out in the introduction, because of my particular background I have an ideal in mind, an ideal connection to tradition that was so well framed by the quote from György Martin.

According to this point of view, the vital aspect of the connection to tradition is to start out with a rigorous examination of what is, or was. Not what I imagine it to be. Let me use an example about gypsies to illuminate the difference. John Paskievich, a Canadian film-maker, shot a documentary in Eastern Slovakia called "The Gypsies of Svinia". The film is a bone-chillingly accurate account of conditions in Svinia's gypsy ghetto and of the hate-filled relationship between the gypsies and the town's "white" population. The film is as real a picture of "what is" as one can get. On the other hand, Tony Gatlif made a beautiful but largely imaginary film about gypsies which paints a somewhat idyllic picture of gypsy lore from Rajasthan to Spain and includes Slovakia. "Latcho Drom"

is a great example of how people generally imagine gypsy life. (Hence its resounding box office success.)

My point is that Paskievch's work would be a good source if one were to want to know about the reality of gypsy life, whereas Gatlif's film would actually be rather unhelpful.

This brings me to the first important difference between the two examples I cited at the beginning of this paper. While the Symposium respondents generally tended to be connected to real traditions, the sequined girl suffered either from a lack of knowledge of the reality of Hungarian folkdance tradition or had an actual preference for the imaginary, or both.

Any movement which is heavily involved in performance acts as a mirror for its chosen or inherited culture. Needless to say, in this context the difference between the real and the imaginary is projected outwards and magnified: the first allowing a measure of true insight into a given tradition, the second establishing or reinforcing cultural misconceptions. For example, a person visiting a *táncház* may get a fair idea of what a Saturday night dance might have been like in a Transylvanian village. On the other hand, people watching our sequined soloist will have been substantially misled about the nature of Hungarian dance traditions.

There is a lesson to be learned from the contrast between these two examples. Views of authenticity can change and develop. But there are conditions necessary for this change. They seem to include the existence of dedicated researchers and ethnographers, of teachers and experts who can disseminate the fruit of this research, and of a wide spectrum of people involved in the movement who have a reverent, diligent attitude to tradition.

I'd like to end by expressing the debt of gratitude which the Hungarian folkdance movement owes its researchers, people like György Martin and his colleagues. Because of their immense achievement, the Hungarian folkdance movement is now firmly grounded in the reality of tradition rather than in the facile realm of fantasy.

NOTES

¹ For papers discussing or touching on this topic see L. Felföldi and T. J. Buckland, eds., *Authenticity: Whose Tradition?* (Budapest: European Folklore Institute, 2002).

² János Szász, "Beszélgetés Martin Györggyel az új folklorhullám és néptáncmozgalom előzményeiről" [A conversation with György Martin about the antecedents of the new wave in our folklore and folk-dance movements], *Kultura és Közösség*, 1981. (My translation.)

³ An aspect of the *táncház* [literally: dance-house] movement in Canada is discussed in Stephen Satory, "Táncház: Improvisatory Folk-dancing and String Playing in Toronto's Hungarian Community," *Hungarian Studies Review* 8, 2 (Fall, 1986): 53-62.

⁴ The seminal work on this subject is György Martin, *Magyar tánc típusok és táncdialektusok* [Hungarian dance types and dance dialects] (Budapest: Néptáncpedagógusok könyvtára, 1970). See also László Felföldi and E. Pesvár, eds., *A magyar nép és nemzetiségeinek tánc hagyományai* [The dance legacy of the Hungarian people and its nationalities] (Budapest: Planétás, 1997).

⁵ Though it is located east of the Danube river, the dances of this village, famous for its colourful embroidery and delicious paprika, belong to the Transdanubian dialect.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire

I'm preparing a paper on dancers' attitudes to Hungarian dance. Please help me by answering the following questions. The questionnaire should take about 10 to 20 minutes of your time. Thank you for your help.

ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND

- 1) Age:
- 2) Sex: female ___ male ___
- 3) Ethnic origin or nationality:
- 4) Are you a dancer who is primarily: amateur ___ professional ___
- 5) Do you also teach dancing? Often ___ sometimes ___ never ___
- 6) What is your primary motivation for dancing?

Recreational, social, fun ___
 Performing ___
 Financial ___
 Health, aerobics, exercise ___
 Teaching ___
 Other _____

DANCE

- 1) How long have you been involved with Hungarian dance? _____ years
 2) What kinds, styles, regional variants of Hungarian dance are you involved with? (List in order of preference, please.)

- 3) How did you first learn Hungarian dance? (please feel free to check more than one, or to number according to importance)

From professional instructors at courses, camps or workshops ___
 Informally from friends, other dancers ___
 From instructional videos ___
 At the source ___ (from native informants in the traditional community)
 Other (please specify) _____

- 4) How much time do you spend dancing per week? _____ hours

- 5) How is most of this time spent?

Practicing ___
 Dancing with friends ___
 Teaching ___
 Performing ___
 Other _____

- 6) Have you ever visited the country or countries that are the source of the dances you do? Often or for a long time ___

Sometimes ___

Never ___

- 6) Have you ever seen your dances danced in their traditional setting? (Please describe briefly where, when, who was dancing, what were they dancing, to what kind of music, what were the costumes, etc.)

DANCING AND MUSIC

1) Do you play any musical instruments?

No ___ Yes ___

Specify: _____

2) What kind of music do you usually dance to?

Live ___ Recorded ___

3) What kind of music do you prefer?

Live ___ Recorded ___ It does not matter ___

4) What styles of music do you prefer?

5) Which are your preferred musical groups or musicians?

DANCING AND COSTUMES

1) What do you normally wear when you dance Hungarian dances with your friends or group in a non-performance setting?

2) What do you normally wear for a public performance? How does it differ from the above?

3) Where and how do you obtain your costumes?

Buy them from various commercial sources ___

Sew them yourself following authentic patterns ___

Make them yourself using your own imagination ___

Obtain them from native wearers from the original community ___

A mix of the above ___

4) Approximately how many dance costumes do you own?

