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CULTURE AT THE CORE:
INVENTED TRADITIONS AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES.

PART II: COMMUNITY FORMATION*

Tradition is defined in Part I (last issue) as a spontaneous expression of a people created within its community and characterized by continuity and transmission. Such a definition relies upon a geographic community where continuity occurs through regular practice facilitated by the close proximity of the members of that community. Transmission happens during these interactions through emulation of, and correction by, other community members. Invented traditions, on the other hand, do not rely on geography. Rather, the initiators of the tradition devise other means to gain continuity and transmission. As a result, a non-geographic community is created around a shared identity embodied in a single cultural expression. Part I discussed how the four traditional dance genres in Scotland were devised to create identity. Part II will extend this idea to explore how contexts and transmission processes are developed to facilitate community.

Community

Despite common usage, there is no authoritative definition of community. The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology admits the vagueness of the word, characterizing community as “a set of societal relationships based on something which the participants have in common – usually a common sense of identity.” This definition is broad enough to encompass geographic or traditional communities as well as what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities,” that is, a group of people who share a common identity but do not necessarily
live in the same place or know all other members of that community. Imagined communities, in part, are generated by invented traditions. However, for non-geographic communities, no criteria exist for labeling a group of people a community. Therefore, in my research, I have created criteria based on the above definition and common scholarly usage of the term.

The first and most obvious criterion is that a community must have boundaries. Being a member of a community implies that there are non-members and that a boundary exists to distinguish the two. "A set of societal relationships," suggests the second criterion, social structure. Without social structure, there would be no distinction between groups that form a community and groups, such as subway riders, that share a common identity but have no other relationship. Although social structure can be understood in many ways, here it refers to how community members interact. The last criterion, institutionalization, comes from a community’s need to extend beyond its actual membership at any given time. The three criteria for community, then, are boundaries, social structure, and institutionalization.

Analysis of the four traditional dance genres in Scotland reveal that certain key factors, notably, the presence of a primary organization, the establishment of a technique, and the choice of context affect the development of community. This part of the paper will explore the interplay between invented traditions and community formation, and demonstrate how these factors develop the parameters necessary for a community.

**Scottish Country Dance**

Scottish Country Dance has been developed and fostered primarily by a single organization, the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS). Coordinated by its head office in Edinburgh, RSCDS boasts 170 branches worldwide from “Aberdeen to Adelaide, Capetown to Chicago and Tokyo to Toronto,” as stated on its website, as well as nearly 500 affiliated groups. It has a total membership of 25,000, out of an estimated 50,000 dancers worldwide. Founded by
Jean Milligan in 1923, RSCDS remains the only organization coordinating Scottish Country Dance. Milligan was a teacher at Jordan Hill College, Scotland’s premier teachers’ college, and noted for her exceptional abilities as both a teacher and a promoter. Not surprisingly, RSCDS places much emphasis on teaching and technique. The combination of a single driving organization and a well-defined technique significantly influenced the development of the performance contexts and possibilities for transmission. The result has been a vibrant, self-sufficient (as opposed to government-subsidized), world-wide community.

**Organization**

RSCDS, founded to “protect and promote Scottish Country dance,” at the start of the re-invented dance tradition had important consequences in terms of the creation of a Scottish Country Dance community. First, RSCDS provided a key element for community formation, institutionalization. Second, RSCDS has deliberately and very successfully created contexts and regulated transmission. Finally, it exercised significant influence over community lore. In other words, RSCDS has created or invented a unified conception of the dance steps and their history as well as the identity they encompass.

In many traditions people argue over what is “traditional” or “authentic,” but not in Scottish Country Dance. Its practitioners certainly debate, as revealed by a quick glance at the Strathspey e-mail list discussions or the writings of Hugh Foss, a past RSCDS chairman and prolific author. However, arguments are based only on movements not specified by Milligan, for example, the pousette. A box figure for two couples, it originally started on the left foot with hands held in the middle. However, when the waltz was introduced, the pousette was done in a waltz hold and accordingly started on the right foot. Milligan changed the arms back to being held in the middle but did not specify the feet. Practitioners never argue over whether the arms are correct, but they frequently argue about which foot to start on. Research and discussion frequently occur for intellectual stimulation as well, but never
do they serve to dispute Milligan or the correct way to do Scottish Country Dance. Both Hugh Foss and Alan Mair acknowledge that there are fashions and a bit of individuality in every group of dancers, but generally, people agree on RSCDS standards of movement and steps.

Such uniformity comes from two directions: the tradition’s single source and its subsequent written form. Milligan defined Scottish Country Dance and taught it personally internationally as well as through RSCDS. Much of the community lore is based on Milligan’s teaching, validating her authority. RSCDS wrote down very precisely the tradition as developed by Milligan. Steps have been named and explained and the corresponding figures diagrammed. As documented in many other traditions, once a dance is recorded, that version is considered to be the correct one, and so gains added legitimacy.

Having a definitive, written, and undisputed record of the tradition was essential for creating community boundaries in this case. In geographic communities, boundaries are usually obvious, articulated by the physical social space of a group. In imagined communities, boundaries are often drawn along ascriptive or ethnic lines. However, in this case, the boundaries are created by knowledge, that is, learning the dances, the symbols of identity, and the appropriate behavior as established by the community. Decisive “correct” dances facilitated the growth of the Scottish Country Dance community. It developed around an established, unchanging tradition rather than the reverse, common to geographic communities, where an established community molds the tradition.

Forming boundaries in this way has had several ramifications for the social structure of the Scottish Country Dance community. First, there have been few serious rifts within the community. It is characterized instead by general agreement. Only those who wish to join, do. Dissatisfied members can easily leave. Second, because Scottish Country Dance requires no previous connection, mental or physical, to a certain set of individuals or a piece of land, it can easily travel world-wide.
**Technique**

Teaching is critical to maintaining a definitive version of Scottish Country Dance. A technique was developed to transmit the dance movement in an orderly, precise fashion. Most classes begin with a warm-up that leads to the practicing of basic steps and figures. The class ends with learning one or more dances that contain these movements. This teaching method ensures that all dancers both recognize and can name all the basic building blocks. Thus, Scottish Country Dance is based on a dance technique, comparable to ballet or Graham. Individuals’ movements are not handed down, but rather a collective consensus on the movement is passed on. Technique is instrumental in providing continuity and contributes to institutionalization.

RSCDS also regulates technique through a teacher certification process. From the beginning, the organization has required its teachers to pass two examinations. To pass them, teachers must be knowledgeable about the history and music associated with the tradition, and be able to both dance and teach the dances. Both dancing and teaching require intimate knowledge of the technique. However, the examinations are only a means to an end. By dictating what knowledge every teacher is required to have and what standard must be attained, RSCDS controls change. Technique then, enables RSCDS to sustain the unity that is so vital to maintaining its boundaries.

Technique has a further practical purpose in the classroom. It facilitates teaching. It serves as a way to introduce the dance form to a beginner, accelerating the process of familiarity and allowing the tradition to be transmitted. In geographic communities, this happens through frequent contact. A technique also breaks the movements into discreet components that can be learned easily. Beginners, particularly men, noted in interviews that when they knew the basics, they were more willing to attend a dance event. In addition, technique gives the beginner something to focus on in class if s/he is not yet prepared to learn the dances. At the same time, it keeps the more experienced dancers from getting bored. Advanced classes keep themselves engaged by continuing to work on the grace of their movements and stylistic refinements such as
pointing their feet. Thus, technique facilitates the transmission process, particularly important in an invented tradition.

**Context**

RSCDS developed an extremely effective social context in what might be called a “class and dance ball” system. Today, most dancers attend weekly classes and monthly or quarterly balls, depending on their level of enthusiasm. Classes are not drop-ins but require a commitment of usually ten weeks. The regular interaction of people in class forms a social space, the basis of the social structure.

Balls are the next step up in the structure. They do not take place as frequently as classes and require significant preparation. Much time goes into learning the dances that will be on the program, thus providing an incentive for attending classes. The periodic ball then gives structure and meaning to what would otherwise be random learning. Possibly more importantly, balls and classes provide social events for couples and places where single people can meet others and enjoy a wider circle of friends. Balls also provide an opportunity to dress up and for the men to wear the kilt. According to several informants, this is a great attraction for learning Scottish Country Dance and going to balls. The system thus creates a social space and provides incentives to generate the interaction necessary for a community of adults.

These social contexts, however, do not encourage young people to dance. Not surprisingly, RSCDS has had difficulty in getting children and teenagers to take up Scottish Country Dance. In part, it is an activity for couples rather than for large groups in which children usually participate. The goals of learning, in this case, going to balls, are not geared toward children either, as they are less likely to be interested in couple-based social events. However, Alan Mair noted that competitive dance festivals were more successful with children than with adults.\textsuperscript{viii} A competitive structure changes the goal of learning from “social” to “winning,” and children often take inspiration from competition. Festivals, Mair noted, worked less well with adults and soon fell out of use. For children, on the other hand, festivals give them age-appropriate goals.
Scottish Country Dance is done by children in other contexts. For example, Joanne MacLean taught Scottish Country Dance to children in Glasgow’s worst neighborhood. Here the final goal was a performance, giving the children a sense of purpose and enhancing their self-esteem. However, this use of dance is very different from that of RSCDS. These children were not part of a country dance community but were simply using the dances. Indeed, children are not an integral part of the social structure of the Scottish Country Dance community. Most dancers enter this community as adults, starting in university. Unlike traditions in geographic communities that are passed from elders to children, the Scottish Country Dance tradition gains continuity from the instructional class.

Additional contexts for Scottish Country Dance have developed more recently. One is the demonstration team, a group of experienced dancers who perform together. As in the context of the competitive festival, the demonstration team context changes the goal from social interaction to perfection. This goal raises the bar for the advanced dancer, providing continued inspiration and incentive. For the advanced dancer, the focus is not merely on remembering the figures but accurately achieving the timing and spacing in relation to the seven other members in the set. At the same time, performances appeal to many more adult dancers than do competitions. Several dancers have explained their preference for performing in terms of giving the gift of dance to the audience or demonstrating their Scottish heritage.

Written literature and the internet enlarge the social contexts for Scottish Country Dance. Hugh Foss is probably the most prolific author on the subject, but others have also written about the history of country dancing and its rebirth as RSCDS style. Foss published several short books, one called Sunday Writings, which is a mixture of poetry and tongue-in-cheek debates about the execution of certain dance figures and the nature of RSCDS itself. The Web provides a similar, but more contemporary outlet. People invest a lot of time making web pages detailing the history of Scottish Country Dance, posting dance class times and information about Balls,
and talking about dance in newsgroups. Not only do these contexts give people a hobby, but they increase the strength of the social connections between dancers. ix

Further expanding the number of contexts are summer schools and weekend workshops. The main RSCDS summer school takes place in St. Andrew’s every year. It has been a meeting place for dancers and musicians for years, giving people something active and fun to do on their holidays. It is also the place where the dances, usually twelve in number, published by the society for that year are first taught. Recently, workshop weekends in exotic places, such as Hungary have become popular as well. Although they are not advertised as holidays, they function much like them. Workshops give people a reason to go to a given place and provide a community once they get there.

Highland Dance

Highland Dance shares several similarities with Scottish County Dance—a central organization, a regulated technique, and an international field. One organization is responsible for establishing the standards that exist in Highland Dance today, the Scottish Official Board of Highland Dance (SOBHD). However, it is not the only organization promoting Highland Dance. There exist separate, recently affiliated organizations in the United States, Canada, and Australia, and a second organization in Scotland itself, the Scottish Official Highland Dance Association (SOHDA). All these organizations are united by a single, highly regulated technique established by SOBHD. Highland Dance also has an international outlook, although not practiced in as many places as Scottish Country Dance. Highland Dance is found primarily in the United Kingdom and many parts of the former British Empire, particularly Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and South Africa. Like Scottish Country Dance, it represents a self-sufficient tradition not relying on government funding but on the active involvement of many members. In contrast with Scottish Country Dance, Highland Dance contexts have developed within a system of competitions and medal tests.
Organization

SOBHD was formed in 1952 to regulate and preserve Highland Dance. The genre, however, predated the founding of the organization, an important distinction between Highland and Scottish Country Dance. Like RSCDS, SOBHD provided the necessary institutionalization for a community to develop. However, as an organization, it was unable to provide unity comparable to the Scottish Country Dance movement. SOBHD standardized steps and dances, wrote them down, and, in the process, created a technique. However, for many, particularly when regulation was first imposed on advanced dancers, the changes were forced. Dancers were pressured to attend only sanctioned events and to dance appropriate steps. Thus, conflict rather than unity pervaded the community.

The conflict engendered by SOBHD illustrates the problems with boundary formation and the necessity of perimeters. As in Scottish Country Dance, the boundaries of the Highland Dance community are neither of a geographic nor ascriptive nature. One enters the community by learning the dances and participating in one or more social contexts. However, such perimeters work only if the dance form is relatively static. In other words, without standardization, despite the conflict that it has engendered within the Highland Dance community, community development would not have taken place and is endangered. The newly formed SOHDA is a case in point.

Dissent with SOBHD regulation in Scotland led to the formation of SOHDA. Although regulated competitions have been the norm in Scotland for the last thirty years, practitioners in such places as Australia and New Zealand, where SOBHD standardization and subsequent regulation did not hold sway, stuck to an “old way” of dancing. In addition, recent research carried out by individuals such as Mats Melin has brought to light an older repertoire and style of dance maintained in Scotland itself. The newly-formed SOHDA was established to include many of these dances. In other respects, however, SOHDA continues much in the vein of SOBHD, writing down the dances in a standardized form and
having a competition system of its own. Although SOHDA purports to have a different identity from SOBHD, the similarities in structure between the two Highland Dance organizations illustrate the need for specificity of the dance form if a community is to be formed.

Other organizations have sprung up around Highland Dance, which were formed because SOBHD’s jurisdiction did not reach beyond Scotland. These include FUSTA (United States) and ScotDance Canada. Organizations overseas did not fight with SOBHD about technique; that is, the Americans and Canadians did not argue about what was traditional to Scotland but rather took the tradition as presented and danced it. They formed their own organizations, mostly within the last ten years, to expand context through elaborating the competition system. The Scots, on the other hand, did not see the need to regulate dance outside Scotland. It was Scottish dance, to be preserved in Scotland. If dancers wanted to dance at the World Championships in Scotland, it was incumbent on them to conform. This is a very different attitude from the one taken by Milligan and RSCDS. Therefore, although Highland Dance is performed wherever expatriates have brought it, it was not originally disseminated and regulated internationally. It would seem that SOBHD did not intend Highland Dance to draw non-Scots into its community but rather to maintain the Scottish community, even though it is possible for non-Scots to become involved.

**Technique**

The standardization of Highland Dance with the formation of SOBHD in 1952 functioned to create a technique. Popular dances at competitions were sanctioned as legitimate, and steps were chosen from the repertoires of well-known dancers and recorded. Today there are four main dances called Highland dances, two “character” dances (jig and hornpipe), and thirteen “national” dances. Each has about eight steps, of which six are usually combined to create the dance at any one time. A textbook has been created, necessitating that all positions be clearly defined and the dances written down. Everything has been specified from the angle of the
head and knee to the placement of the feet in each position. As demonstrated above, the creation of a technique is essential to institutionalization and boundary creation.

Technique, or the existence of it, also affects social structure. After standardization, there was a shift of focus in the Highland Dance community from presentation to technique. Previously, dancers had been judged on how creatively they choreographed and performed their own steps. Although technical skill was required, it was not the primary focus of the dance. Today, judging is divided into three categories, timing, general deportment, and technique. The first two categories are scored on a ten-point scale, and the latter on an eighty-point scale. Clearly technique is far more important than musicality or performance, making Highland Dance more suited to competitions and displays than to small gatherings where personal interaction prevails. Not surprisingly, Highland Dance with its visual impact is used to represent an abstract idea of Scotland rather than to induce interaction between performers and audience in small community gatherings.

Highland Dance technique, however, allowed it to leave Scotland easily. One could pick up a book, as dance researcher Mats Melin did in his youth in Sweden, and learn the dances. Furthermore, doing Highland Dance correctly is a straightforward procedure since, according to SOBHD, there is only one way, and that is the right way. This makes it feasible for outsiders to participate in a national “imagined” community of Scotland. However, the form does little to develop community on a local level, given the way technique has structured the dances.

Context

Although the contexts for Highland Dance are expanding rapidly today, the principal one remains competition. The average dancer attends approximately ten to fifteen competitions a year. The most competitive dancer can attend one every weekend from May until August. Each competition is divided into groups and age categories. There are five groups: Primary, for those under seven, Beginner, Novice,
Intermediate, and Premier. One must win a medal at six competitions in the Beginner and the Novice categories and spend a year in Intermediate before entering the Premier category. Each category is then broken down further into age groups, depending upon the number of dancers. This system provides both short-term and long-term goals for the participants. There is always another competition where one can test oneself or another level of expertise to attain.

Once children move into the Premier class, the goals change. The focus is on perfecting technique. The means to this end is a system of “championship steps” published annually for competition use. Each year SOBHD decides on the combination of existing steps that will be used in each of the four Highland dances. In this way dancers are required to learn well and dance all the steps possible for each dance over the course of three or four years. The hierarchy in which dancers function changes as well. Instead of moving up classes, they attempt to win events with a broader base of competitors, first a regional championship, then an inter-regional (or national) championship, and finally the world championship.

The competition system works well to facilitate a high standard of dancing that can be adjudicated because of its rigid technique. However, the competition system was developed for children. The oldest Premier category is for those eighteen and over. For a variety of reasons, competitions do not have the same appeal for adults as for children. Possibly, because at competition level, Highland Dance is as grueling as any strenuous athletic competition, making it difficult for adults with aging bodies to maintain the level of training demanded. Consequently, even though this system provides a context for children to learn and develop skill, it does little to continue the dance tradition. Sometimes the children of Highland dancers participate, but most children are new recruits each generation.

The Workshop and the Festival have developed in conjunction with the competition system. Workshops are structured around learning the championship steps and finding out what the judges will be looking for in any given year.
Such workshops serve the Premier dancers. In the last several years, the Festival context has emerged. The Festival is a competition for the pre-Premiers where the dancers receive comments from the judge as well as awards. These events have only developed in America and Canada and have not been adopted in Scotland. They function in support of the competition system but exhibit the slightly more social aspect associated with Highland Dance in these two diaspora areas.

A regional and inter-regional competition system has developed in the United States and Canada, but does not exist in Scotland. The Scots participate only in that they host the world championships every year in late August. In the U.S. and Canada, the regional and even more so the inter-regional competitions have become social events as well as competitive ones. The latter, for example, last four to five days and include sightseeing activities and social mixers. This change in the social structure of the dancers, from competitors to friends, seems to reflect a desire, first, to form a stronger Highland Dance community by deepening the bonds between members, and second, to encourage older dancers to continue dancing. Scotland is more resistant to change, possibly because they are more oriented toward symbolizing their community than forming it.

Another important context for Highland Dance is performance. Performances occur in many places, but particular venues are such “Scottish” gatherings as St. Andrew’s Society events in November, Robert Burns’ suppers in January, and, recently, Tartan Day in April. Highland Dance displays are also a feature of such major events as the Edinburgh military tattoo in August at Edinburgh Castle or an international tour of a Scottish regimental pipe band. Highland Dance performances work well to represent Scottish culture, both in Scotland and in the diaspora.

**Stepdance**

Stepdance differs radically from the two previous genres. A very old Scottish tradition, it had fallen out of fashion in Scotland by the 1920s, surviving only on Cape Breton Island.
Beginning in 1992, the famous Cape Breton step-dancer, Harvey Beaton, taught Stepdance for several consecutive summers in Scotland at Sabhal Mor Ostaig, the Gaelic college on Skye. Several of the graduates have gone on to teach and develop performance groups in the last decade, gradually reintroducing the genre. Stepdance had existed mostly in the geographically defined communities of the Highlands and Islands. Thus, then and now, there exists no organizing body, defined technique, or invented contexts to perpetuate the form. In order to take root outside geographic communities, Stepdance has become associated with the traditional music community.

**Organization**

Ten or twelve graduates from the Sabhal Mor Ostaig course are currently teaching in Scotland. Three of these people/groups are actively developing the Stepdance tradition – Frank McConnell, Mats Melin, and the Scottish Step Dance Company headed by John Sikorski and Keri. Each, however, is exploring different aspects of the dance form. McConnell has done significant research in Cape Breton and is interested in exploring the rhythms to their utmost within the traditional format as defined by the Cape Breton standard. Although he is a contemporary dance choreographer, McConnell has chosen not to mix contemporary, and traditional dance. In contrast, the Scottish Step Dance Company (SSDC) has been pushing the limits of Stepdance to accommodate the increasingly complicated rhythms of Scottish traditional music. For example, SSDC happily dances to tunes in unusual meters, such as 7/8, and they are creating a repertoire of jig steps which previously didn’t exist. Melin, on the other hand, is doing a bit of both. He looks at Stepdance as part of a range of Scottish dance, linking older styles and modern Highland Dance. His company, Dansa, performs a range of styles from the extremely traditional to very contemporary manipulations of Stepdance material. The lack of a guiding organization has allowed such individual exploration of the form but has done little to build community.

 Tradition, as discussed in Part I, implies an identity and a
community to shape it. However, Melin and Keri characterize tradition very differently, illustrating the distinctions that can develop in the absence of a defining organization. Melin, an outsider from Sweden, refers to Stepdance as “the” tradition, implying there is a standard that one can improvise and innovate within, but not change. Keri, on the other hand, refers to Stepdance as “our” tradition. She maintains that as long as the form reflects her idea of Scottish dancing, not employing the flashy high kicks found in Irish dance, for example, and is connected to the music, she is free to “muck about” with steps.

These contrasting conceptions of the “tradition” imply different communities. For Melin, Stepdance seems to symbolize a community – the old Scottish Highland geographic communities in this case – rather than reflect one, and thus, change is limited. Keri, on the other hand, interacts on a regular basis with traditional musicians who form something of a “geographic community.”xv She, like them, is not self-conscious about change in the dance form, seeing it as a reflection of herself. The difference is in the boundaries. For Melin, one can join the community by learning the dance form. Learning in this case is distinct from either Scottish Country Dance or Highland Dance, because what one must learn to be part of the community is not explicit; it is a longer, more involved process. However, for Keri, becoming part of her community depends on more than just learning the form; it depends on acceptance by the community.

Common to Melin and Keri, however, is a sense that Stepdance is communal. They both noted in interviews that Stepdance is characterized by a particularly intense connection between the rhythm of the music and the dance, and thus between the musicians and the dancers. There is a lot of give-and-take among the participants, who shape the outcome together. Therefore, this form works very well to create a sense of community among a group of people who interact regularly because they have a shared geographic base as well as a common interest, but it does little to create community on a grander scale in the manner of Highland Dance or Scottish Country Dance.
Technique

In contrast with Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance, Scottish Stepdance has no technique. There are basic steps for each meter of music, but Stepdance is primarily an improvised form. Keri teaches a variety of old steps learned from masters such as Harvey Beaton and new steps that she has created. However, she always teaches variations to prevent a dancer from being ensnared by a particular step if it does not fit the music. The individual steps are not important in themselves. They are not named and are rarely repeated verbatim. Melin takes a similar approach to teaching, spending a great deal of time on drilling steps so that the dancer’s feet become completely familiar with specific movements and rhythms. Ultimately, the goal is to gain fluency of movement in order to improvise. Achieving such a goal takes regular interaction with an accomplished dancer, either in a class or a social context. Thus, Stepdance is most readily learned in a geographic community. Unsurprisingly, the diffusion of this revived form has not spread quickly within Scotland and not at all outside the country.

Until recently, Stepdance did not have a written form. Consequently, little emphasis was placed on learning a canon of steps and dancers typically made up their own steps. Individuals developed a small repertoire and either varied or improvised on them. Now, however, people have begun to develop ways of recording steps. Keri, for example, has devised a system combining rhythm notation to mark the number of beats and arrows to show the direction of the foot. Her system allows her to maintain a greater repertoire of steps and to help her students remember them more easily. Since her system is not legible to outsiders, no exchange with other dancers occurs. Thus, human interaction on a regular basis is still required to learn new steps and develop the form. The emphasis remains on the exchange rather than the learning of steps, on community rather than symbolic performance.

Context

The most common context for Stepdance is performance. Two companies exist, the Scottish Stepdance Company and
Dansa. The Scottish Stepdance Company focuses on giving the audience an understanding of the connection between the music and dance. They use both old and new traditional music, inventing the accompanying steps. At times, other dance forms such as Flamenco are incorporated. Nonetheless, Keri has an underlying, if not articulated, notion of what is Scottish about Scottish Stepdance. Although she cannot define it, she easily answers questions about what is not Scottish. For example, she feels that Scottish Stepdance will never be used in a show like Riverdance. “The Scots are more modest than that,” she says. “It wouldn’t make sense, all those high kicks and flashy costumes. We don’t think like that here on Skye.”

Dansa, Mats Melin’s group, which includes Frank McConnell, is radically different. They, too, are doing performance-oriented dances. However, they draw mostly upon the knowledge they have as traditional dancers. Their first commission was based on the rhythm of a spinning wheel and included step-dancing, Scotch reels, quadrilles, and some contemporary movement. They are currently developing steps to create a work based on a waulking song, a type of old Scottish work song. Their dances use elements already defined as Scottish, unlike the dances of the SSDC, which include Flamenco and jazz. Both companies represent “tradition” and all that connotes, but in a contemporary form appealing to today’s audiences.

The performance context of Stepdance has had several consequences for the development of community. First, Stepdance does not provide regular, participatory contexts comparable to the class and dance-ball system of Scottish Country Dance or the competition system of Highland Dance. Although the genre Stepdance promotes community, its main context, the stage, does not. At best, performance symbolizes a communal, interactive geographic community. Yet it differs sharply in its symbolic nature from Scottish Country Dance or Highland Dance. Stepdance is actively evolving and is a contemporary, changing expression of the

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traditional music community. Second, although performances also provide some sort of institutionalization, economic pressures on performing groups jeopardize this process, and so Stepdance must rely heavily on government funding.

Stepdance has yet to find a proper social context. It is gaining popularity as a way of adding variety to concerts of traditional music, and it is often performed during musical ceilidhs. It still does not have a setting where others can watch, copy, or, if experienced, exchange new steps. However, Melin has noted that people are beginning to bring Stepdance back into Ceilidh dance halls, where, he hopes, it will begin to flourish with the regular give-and-take of good dancers. The lack of a consistent context, since it has neither a geographic community nor an organization to provide one, is another reason that a larger community has not coalesced around this dance form.

Although some regular classes exist — such as Frank McConnel’s in Inverness or the ones held through the Edinburgh and Glasgow fiddle-clubs — most people learn Stepdance through the intermittent youth Feisean workshops, or short summer courses, such as those given by Sabhal Mor Ostaig. Consequently, most people know only the basic steps. Even if they have been able to learn a lot of steps, they are unlikely to have developed fluency in the idiom because the learning period was too short a time. Lack of fluency in the idiom does not foster the necessary social institutions to develop the form. At present, only those who are performing regularly are actively practicing and developing steps. Without a regular context, the transmission process based on learning by example breaks down, preventing Stepdance from developing into an effective expression of community.

Stepdance does not travel easily. When it has moved to other parts of the world, such as Quebec and the United States, it has been integrated into the host culture where it has become the expression of the community doing it and not a symbol of its culture of origin. Because it is not symbolically Scottish but communally Scottish, relying on the give-and-take of people in Scotland, it has not traveled abroad without changing into a local expression of culture.
Cheilidh Dancing

Cheilidh Dance is a social dance form comparable to, but less formal than, Scottish Country Dance. It was originally done in community dance halls and at weddings. It fit well into the social patterns of geographic communities. Even when those patterns changed, people continued to learn and do the dances in school, at weddings, and other social and community events. The dancing never died out completely in the twentieth century, although it was not until the late 1980s that Cheilidh Dance reappeared in urban settings. Pubs in Edinburgh, the Riverside Club in Glasgow, university clubs, and traditional music events now provide regular venues for Cheilidh Dance.

Organization

Despite Cheilidh Dance’s rebirth, no organization has sprung up to regulate it. Like Stepdance, people use the dance form as situationally appropriate. For example, the Riverside Club uses it as entertainment; university clubs use it to create a social event. Individual, unconnected contexts provide a kind of institutionalization, as was historically the case, rather than an overarching organization as in Scottish Country Dance or Highland Dance. In a sense, Cheilidh Dance forms a small community in each venue, but, in contrast to Scottish Country Dance or Highland Dance, no community is formed across all Cheilidh dancers. Every group structures cheilidh dances to suit their needs and express their identity; the only continuity is provided by the cheilidh bands.

Technique

Cheilidh Dance is a fairly simple dance form. There are seven main dances that everybody can learn by watching the dancers or listening to the caller’s instructions. The steps are drawn almost entirely from pedestrian movement. The more complicated ones have been changed into easier forms, for example, pas de basque into stamp and kick. The simplicity of the dances allows everybody to join in, disrupting the notion of boundaries. If everybody can dance, then the community cannot be restricted by the ability to learn the
dances, as in Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance. In this case, the movement does not create boundaries but rather facilitates the creation of context, as will be demonstrated below.

**Context**

Cheilidh dances have become very popular in universities. Every university club, whether the rowing club or international students club, holds a cheilidh dance each term. There is one almost every weekend. However, students rarely attend more than one or two a semester. Ironically, cheilidh dances give context to a social evening rather than require context to happen. They work because they facilitate interaction among participants and because extensive knowledge or skill is not required to participate. Cheilidhs have been adopted because they help create community. This community does not coalesce around the dance form as in the previous genres, but rather, by using its dances as a context.

Cheilidh dances function similarly in the traditional music community, where they are done as a form of recreation. In this case they become another expression of an already existing community. There are regular contexts whenever musicians get together. The most respected dancers are copied, and the tradition is passed down and developed in this way, a transmission process that emulates most closely the process that occurred in the pre-industrial geographic communities of Scotland. Thus, Cheilidh Dance facilitates social interaction in small-scale, local communities, as opposed to Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance, which create far-flung international communities.

The Riverside Club in Glasgow has become another regular context for the genre, holding cheilidh dances every Friday night. The club provides the necessary institutionalization for a localized community. Unlike other cheilidh contexts though, the number of dances are increasing rapidly because most people attend regularly and tire of the standard dances. Although more difficult dances are taught by a caller, the more common ones are not. Therefore, it is very difficult for newcomers to join in. Indeed, the regular, more experienced
dancers often grumble about the presence of beginners. Thus, in contrast with the previously mentioned contexts of Cheilidh Dance, boundary formation is occurring. Being a member of the community requires learning the dances as in Scottish County Dance, but because the Riverside Club has a fixed location but a fluid population, the identity of the club community is always in flux, and thus the dance form remains a spontaneous expression.

Conclusion

The previous analysis makes clear the effect that a primary organization, a technique, and a context have on the development of a community. A primary organization is necessary to create an imagined community as demonstrated by Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance. However, as demonstrated by Cheilidh Dance at the Riverside Club, an organization is not necessary for establishing a community. Technique allows, and is indeed necessary for a dance form to travel, but its rigidity does little to stimulate local community building. Context influences whether a community is created, who participates, the social structure, and the transmission process.

All four Scottish traditional dance genres foster community in one way or another. Two approaches can be distinguished, one exemplified by Highland Dance and Scottish Country Dance, the other by Stepdance and Cheilidh Dance. The first uses the dance form as the element around which all the other ingredients necessary for a community coalesce. In contrast, the second provides a missing ingredient in an already existing community. Consequently, Scottish Country Dance and Highland Dance work well on an international level. They provide an expression for a heavily symbolic, transnational Scottish “imagined” community, linking people together in an increasingly global network. The two genres represent Scotland in an abstract way, but they don’t necessarily reflect contemporary Scottish culture. In other words, these dance forms reflect a vision of “official” Scotland, but not necessarily the lived experience of today’s Scottish people.

Stepdance and Cheilidh Dance, on the other hand, function better on a local level. They change to suit the context,
whether performance or cheilidh. They promote interaction between people, allowing the participants to negotiate identity through the dance form. Consequently, these forms are better suited to creating and expressing contemporary Scottish identity. Because they are malleable, they are more accessible to everyone as a form of social expression. As one Cheilidh and Scottish Country dancer commented, “[Cheilidh dancing] shows Scots at their best, pissed [drunk] and having a good laugh.” While the remark was offered in jest, it contains an element of truth recognized by the speaker and the others interviewed for this study.

Traditional dance in Scotland has been utilized and manipulated by different people to negotiate identities and communities in a rapidly changing world. Clearly dance, in whatever form, fills an important void in Scottish communities, both abroad and at home.

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**Endnotes**

i By geographic community is meant a group of people who live in the same place and interact daily—a standard sociological definition.


iv Data is from a survey taken in 1979 and published in the Dance Archive.

v RSCDS webpage, www.rscds.co.uk.

vi Community lore can also be understood as the sociological concept of community memory.

Interview with Alan Mair.

Interview with Cheilidh dancers, Brian Martin, Colin MacLennan, and Leslie, at the Elephant Café, Edinburgh, 8 January, 2002.

Recently, SOBHD has become the world-wide governing body.

SOBHD, Articles of Constitution.

Personal observation.


The community formed in this case functions as a geographic community not because the members necessarily live near each other but because their interaction is regular and the transmission process is of the nature found in a geographic community.

Interview with Keri.

Ibid.