

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.  
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Author(s): Hoppu, Petri

Title: Folk-dancing Communities - Participation through Tradition, Creativity, and Dance Technique

Year: 2021

Version: Publisher's PDF

Please cite the original version:

Hoppu, P. (2021). Folk-dancing Communities - Participation through Tradition, Creativity, and Dance Technique. In M. Metsärinne, R. Korhonen, T. Heino, & M. Esko (Eds.), *Culture and Tradition at School and at Home* (pp. 224-232). Rauma: Rauma Teacher Training School, University of Turku. Retrieved September 24, 2020, from

[https://sites.utu.fi/rnk/wp-content/uploads/sites/861/2021/06/Culture\\_and\\_Tradition\\_at\\_School\\_and\\_at\\_Home.pdf](https://sites.utu.fi/rnk/wp-content/uploads/sites/861/2021/06/Culture_and_Tradition_at_School_and_at_Home.pdf)

# Folk-dancing Communities

## Participation through Tradition, Creativity, and Dance Technique

PETRI HOPPU

The first time I ever participated in a folk dance class was when I was 13 years old. I still remember those two hours when I learned a few simple couple dances with polka, waltz, and buzz steps. I felt like entering a new world I had known nothing about. That day was a beginning of a journey that has continued for more than four decades, as a dancer, dance instructor and teacher, choreographer, and finally, as a dance scholar. During this journey, I have followed several artistic and academic paths, and my knowledge of and attitude to folk dance have changed. I have seen how for many people, folk dance can be a passion that makes one feel valued as part of a particular group of enthusiasts. I have often witnessed how folk dancers keep physically and emotionally together at rehearsals and performances, in community houses, dance studios, stages, or sports fields.

My current ethnographic project is a pilot study of contemporary Finnish folk dance activities. In this article, based on my study, I aim to shed light on the relations between folk dance technique, tradition, creativity, and communality. As a theoretical framework, I apply Judith Hamera's (2007) ideas about dancing communities to

Finnish folk dance groups. Following Hamera, I see folk dance groups as "constituted by dancing: making it, seeing it, learning it, talking, writing and fantasizing about it (2007, 2)." Within communities, dance technique is an essential connective factor of dancing communities: it is a bond that ties dancers, groups, dance schools, and even discourses together (Hamera 2007, 3). In Finnish folk dance, dance technique has been defined and described in several publications since the early twentieth century. Still, folk dancers do not merely repeat traditional forms: they also cultivate them to make them better survive in contemporary society.

To investigate folk-dancing communities, I have used participant observation and interviews but deliberately intended to avoid objectifying and reifying my fellow participants with whom I share the field. I have observed several events that Finnish folk dance groups attend, and I am examining the participants following a Finnish dance researcher Hanna Väättäinen's (2003) ethic principle, "the alluring gaze." A researcher's gaze does not necessarily have to be objectifying, but it can include moments of intimacy and mutual recognition. I want to share the partic-

ipant dancers' experiences, discourses, and activities and devote myself to dialogue with them. This article will discuss my perceptions of a folk dance cavalcade Tanssimylly (Dance Mill) from spring 2019. I will also analyze three interviews I did the same year. The interviewees were folk dancers that participated in the cavalcade either as dancers or dance teachers. Their pseudonyms are "Jaana," "Laura," and "Juho."

I analyze my research material following the nexus analysis principles, with social actions like dancing as the starting point for critical analysis. In nexus analysis, social actions are seen as intersections of historical and discursive trajectories. When repeated regularly, these intersections become "nexuses" of practice: points at which the different trajectories enabling action are conversely altered by the action as these trajectories issue from the moments when an action occurs. (Scollon & Scollon 2004, viii, 28.)

### Dancing Researcher – Researching Dancer

My personal researcher's position can be characterized by two different aspects: a dancing researcher and a researching dancer. This kind of situation is not unusual, but it is prevalent for dance or, for example, music scholars to be both researchers and practitioners in their field (Rice 2008; Kapper 2013a; Nilsson 2017). The embodiment of dancing and music-making are elements that unite different perspectives. An embodied approach opens up other horizons for research: an experience of, as well as interpersonal relationships in, dance. Significantly, thoughts, theories, and analyses are based on my bodily experience. (Hoppu 2014a.)

It is not the first time I encounter someone in dance through ethnographic fieldwork. The use of embodied ethnography dates back to the time I carried out the fieldwork in the 1990s for my Ph.D. thesis (Hoppu 1999) about the minuet in Swedish-speaking Finland. Although I had danced minuets in a folk dance group before, I entered a different world during my field trips to the Finnish West coast regions. Similarly, I did fieldwork among Skolt Saami in North Finland in the 2010s to investigate their dances in contemporary Finnish society (Hoppu 2020).

However, my current research differs from these previous projects since this time, and I start with my own experiences: my folk dance practice for almost forty years is the point of departure of my research. I carry a part of the development of Finnish folk dance in my own embodied experiences, skills, and memories. This implies a new perspective towards the relationship between myself and other participants in my fieldwork. Following an American ethnomusicologist Timothy Rice's (2008) ideas about fieldwork, I regard myself as being "between insider and outsider," which I see as an opportunity to create a dialogue between my own and other folk dance enthusiasts' embodied and shared experiences (see Rice 2008, 48–53).

Before my current ethnographic project, I have investigated Nordic folk dance movements using archival and other historical documents for more than ten years (e.g., Hoppu 2011; Hoppu 2013; Hoppu 2014b). Moreover, I see myself as part of a broader academic context where several other dance scholars have investigated folk dance communities and their activities during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sille Kapper (2013b) analyzed the Estonian folk dance movement and the changes in its ac-

tivities and discourses in her doctoral dissertation. Mats Nilsson discussed historical and contemporary polska dance in his book *The Swedish Polska* (2017), emphasizing the experience of dancing in various contexts. Theresa J. Buckland investigated gender issues in English revivalist Morris dancing in the late twentieth century in her article *Liberating Tradition* (2018). Thus, I already have a great deal of insight into the recent folk dance development, which I will discuss briefly, focusing on the Finnish folk dance field.

### Folk Dance Canons and Fusions

In Finland, folk dance activities began to take shape at the very end of the nineteenth century, similar to other Nordic countries. As a result of decades' long process, which included collecting rural dances, connecting them with previous theatre dances depicting peasant lives, and finally publishing these in several volumes during the first half of the twentieth century, a specific national repertoire appeared in each Nordic country. I refer to the published dances as national canons since they are often described and experienced as traditional folk dances. The canonized dances in the Nordic countries shared several standard features like a strict and regular structure and pure geometrical formations. (Hoppu 2011.)

However, the canons began to be challenged in various ways in the Nordic countries as soon as they were created. The process took a slightly different direction in each of them. While ethnographic research strongly affected Norway and Sweden (Okstad 2007; Nilsson 2007), foreign folk dance performances and other dance forms gave tremendous impetus to folk dance in Finland. After the Sec-

ond World War, Soviet and other Eastern European folk dance groups visited Finland frequently, and like all over the Western World, they gained colossal success. Consequently, there gradually emerged tendencies within the Finnish folk dance field to create more spectacular performances similarly. (Kurkela 1986.) To reach this goal, some Finnish folk dancers wanted to develop their technique in a more challenging direction, and consequently, they began to search for new movement vocabularies. Some of them were influenced by ballet or ballroom dancing, and later especially by contemporary dance, but also by certain foreign folk dance forms.

Foreign influences came from several directions, but Estonia, Hungary, Sweden, and Russian Karelia were the most important. For example, a renowned ballet master and folklorist, Viola Malmi from Petrozavodsk, recreated the style and technique of performing Karelian dances in Finland. Finnish folk dancers regarded Karelian character dances, Estonian choreographies, Hungarian dances, and Swedish polskas as technically challenging. Therefore, folk dance teachers and choreographers incorporated elements from them into their repertoires. However, the process was by no means a simple adoption of foreign elements, but they were merged with Finnish elements, creating new fusions in Finnish folk dance. With influences from other dance forms, the foreign impact created a new level of folk dancing in Finland, with new technical quality and commonly pursued skills. (Hoppu 2014b.)

So, contemporary folk dance in Finland is a fusion of various elements. Many characteristics of so-called traditional folk dance have either been abandoned or altered. Folk dance no longer means merely repeating dances from the national canon, but new dances are continually being



composed. Still, the connection to the traditional folk dance and couple dancing exists, and Finnish folk dancers explicitly recognize it. Tradition is often referred to in folk dance discourses, even if it no longer refers to a canonized dance repertoire. It is considered valuable and essential, and typically, it is connected to nationality and history. Folk dance is almost always seen as belonging to a nation, and Finnishness is emphasized at many levels. Although folk dancers expand themes and methods they use, they most often want to see a connection to tradition, whatever it might be in each case.

### Dance Mill

Suomen Nuorisoseurat, The Finnish Youth Association, arranges the Dance Mill -event for folk dancers older than 15 years biannually. Outside of folklore festivals, the event is a central meeting point for Finnish folk dance groups. The organizers emphasize that the event is not a competition but a cavalcade. Still, all the groups are evaluated by a jury, consisting of four members, three dance teachers, and one professional musician. According to the event's website, one of the evaluation's main goals is to rank groups for high-level national and international performances (Suomen nuorisoseurat 2021). Most groups are classified according to a hierarchical system with six categories, which still makes the event's atmosphere somewhat competitive. However, the relevance of this kind of ranking is somewhat questionable today. Reaching a high-level ranking is more like a question of status, with only little practical significance.

In 2019, the Dance Mill was arranged at the Sori Circus House in Tampere, April 12–14. Thirty-nine folk dance

groups with more than five hundred dancers and musicians from all over Finland participated in the event. The southernmost groups came from the capital region at the southern coast of Finland and the northernmost ones from the province of Lapland.

The activities of the groups participating in the Dance Mill can be understood by the way Judith Hamera describes how dancers modify dance techniques to shape new identities. According to her, dance functions within legible codes, similarly to talking and writing. She refers to these codes as protocols of reading and writing, which are first generated by dance technique itself: they are actualized through practice, in rehearsals, and performances. These codes make both the dancers and the audience understand what is important and essential in dance, where you can see competence and skills. “They make these bodies legible and intelligible, and offer bases for interpretation and critique.” (Hamera 2007, 5–6.)

The Dance Mill's folk dance groups had 10-15 minutes performances, which often had a dance theater character. The performances were based on common dance forms from Finnish folk dances like waltz, polka, quadrille, and polska. The tradition was discursively connected to all performance elements, but how the tradition was actualized in performances were far from self-evident. Negotiations of tradition in dance, music, and costumes by dancers, choreographers, audience, and jury continuously legitimized the changing character of contemporary folk dance performances. However, dance technique was seldom questioned, but it was shared as a standard code of understanding.

An example of the different ways of looking at traditions can be seen in the picture from a performance by the group Siepakat from Northern Finland. The performance's theme was reindeer herding, and costumes were simple shirts and college trousers with pieces of artificial furs to visually connect the performance to the local tradition the performance was referring to. The performance's character was stark, even violent, and contained symbolism referring to repression and abuse of power.



**Figure 1.** Siepakat. Photo: Petri Kivinen. With the permission of Suomen nuorisoseurat.

Another way to look at tradition can be seen in the picture from the group Katrilli from Finland's capital. The theme of the performance was a departure, and it was referring to post-war urbanization, which strongly affected the city of Helsinki during the 40s and onwards. The costumes carried an apparent reference to the post-war era, and the poems that were read during the performance gave an urban, civilized, and even spiritual character to it. The difference between this and Siepakat's more rural, rough, and mythical performance was significant.



**Figure 2.** Katrilli. Photo: Petri Kivinen. With the permission of Suomen nuorisoseurat.

The third example is from the folk dance group Polokkarit from Oulu, the province of Northern Ostrobothnia. The theme of the performance was the Finnish sauna, and it was a humorous and, to some extent, also a satirical overview of Finnish sauna culture. Although the performance did not include nudity, the costumes were, for the most part, extremely minimalistic, creating an impression of naked sauna bathers. Interestingly, Polokkarit's performance was not explicitly urban or rural but created an imaginary space of embodied Finnishness, free from any geographical location. Thus, its perspective to folk tradition differed sharply from Siepakat's and Katrilli's approaches.

What does the analysis of the performances at Dance Mill tell us about folk-dancing communities? One can see that folk dance groups see dance technique as an essential part of the activities. Although groups are different and have different emphases, technique connects dancers, groups, and audiences and works as a protocol of reading and writing. The performances' themes vary significantly, and



**Figure 3.** Polokkarit. Photo: Petri Kivinen. With the permission of Suomen nuorisoseurat.

folk tradition is interpreted from various perspectives, but the fundamentals of dance technique are the same. Consequently, both dancers and audience recognize the performances as belonging to the field of Finnish folk dance. Moreover, discourses of tradition legitimize contemporary folk dance's changing character, connecting it to Finnishness's more or less imaginary narrative.

### Dancing and Belonging

Next, I move to the interviews where Jaana, Laura, and Juho told their stories about folk-dancing and explained how they felt folk dance brings people together. They all emphasized that they, as folk dancers, experience a strong sense of community and regard other dancers as their companions: their dance group and other folk dancers in Finland and worldwide. Thus, folk dance communities create large-scale spatial dynamics that exceed any single dance group or association. Folk dancers may leave their

home and move to another town or city, but they can still find new communities where they can continue their folk dance classes. Moreover, further changes in their lives may force a folk dancer to new relocations and enter other folk dance groups. Hamera (2007, 74–75) calls this kind of a process of searching and settling “roam” and “home.”

From my interviewees, Laura gave the best example of a continuous “roaming” and “home finding” since her current dance group was the third dancing community she had joined. As a child, she danced in a group in her home village. Later, she joined another group in the city she studied and finally, the current one in the city where she found a permanent job. Her story is typical for a Finnish folk dancer since all the groups she joined belonged to associations with community houses where the rehearsals often, though not always, took place. For Laura, all these groups and community houses have represented a home where she has found a new community, family, with which to dance and spend time otherwise. Laura is not an exception since, with a repertoire for enthusiasts of all ages and talent levels, a significant number of folk dance groups exist across Finland, and in most cases, it is not difficult to find a new folk dance group when one moves to another city or village.

With nurturing environment and a relatively sizable male-dancer population, folk dance groups differ from most other dance communities today. For a dancer, a regular engagement in folk dance entails embracing other dancers in the community, often characterized by gendered sub-groups, which both Laura and Juho notified. Interestingly, close contacts between dancers in a community do not always converge with the pressure of dance technical requirements, which can cause some confusion among a group's dancers. This happened to Juho.

Juho started his folk dance career as late as in his thirties while Jaana and Laura joined a folk dance group as a child. Through his studies, Juho had known folk dancers for several years earlier, but it was far from evident for him to participate in regular folk dance classes. One of the main reasons for his decision was knowing the community to some extent beforehand. He emphasized that it was primarily the group's male gang that welcomed him warmly, taking him immediately to its activities. The group Juho joined was a big one with more than thirty members, with a substantial number of male dancers, more than a third of the whole group. Although the group's members supported Juho to develop his dance technique and never expressed any negative judgments about his dancing, he felt inferior since he thought his technical skills were not on such a high level. The significance of dance technique was so touchable in groups' activities and discussions that, as a beginner, Juho felt he was sometimes a burden for the rest of the group, despite the explicit acceptance and endorsement he received from other dancers.

Contemporary folk dance performances seldom consist of a mere repetition of documented traditional dances. Especially within the Finnish Youth Association, new folk dance choreographies have been made actively since the late twentieth century (Hoppu 2007). Through these choreographies, Finnish folk dancers of different generations are continually negotiating the concepts of "folk" and "nation." Folk dancers challenge these concepts by experimenting with various performance practices, reflecting multiple interpretations and narratives of Finnishness, as seen in Dance Mill's three examples. Although folk dancers almost always demonstrate a sense of belonging to the Finnish nation and its culture, they are typically aware of discourses of authenticity, appropriation, and cross-cultural politics within folk dance as well. Contemporary

folk dance performances may even touch themes related to social exclusion, discrimination, and gender issues. Choreographers combine contemporary topics with folk dance technique and traditional narratives, creating peculiar works of art seldom found outside the field of folk dance.

Jaana works as a folk dance teacher and choreographer, and she said that she regarded her work more as art than folkloristic practice. Although tradition has a permanent place in her dance works, and they often have strong connections to local history, she said she wanted to keep her artistic freedom while planning the performances. In addition to making a choreography, she might also write a manuscript for performance and act as a director. She has also made choreographies together with other dance teachers, especially when it has been a mass performance with dozens of dancers included. Her works connect folk dance technique and traditions with contemporary society topics, and she does not hesitate to touch even extremely sensitive themes like harassment or death.

A common discursive concern shared by all the interviewees was the maintenance of Finnish folk dance culture. Everyone agreed that it was essential to keep it alive. It was seen as a part of the Finnish heritage and culture, even though they could seldom explain this in detail. Since folk dance has a history of many decades, dancers considered it essential to maintain. The interviewees' views reflected a mythic narrative of the Finnish dance tradition, created through folk dance practices since the early twentieth century (see Hobsbawm 2012).

As a whole, the interviews created a picture of folk dance as a codified dance form that constitutes relations in space and time historically, locally, and globally. Folk dancers



find themselves placed in the history of the multiple dances, figures, steps, and music, always related to tradition at some level. Still, at the same time, they are aware of the embodied effort they are engaged with here and now while regularly attending folk dance classes and performances. They experience tradition in tales or images but also sweat, pain, and exhaustion.

### Conclusive Remarks

My study results are neither final nor comprehensive, and I intend to continue the research within folk-dancing communities in the future. However, I can preliminarily conclude that connections and encounters with other people through dancing lie at the core of the engagement in folk dance activities. Folk dancers feel that dancing is the right way of social interaction by which friends are easily made and communities generated.

In folk dance, dancing and embodied dance traditions connect participants across social, cultural, and ethnic differences. Events and performances are sites in which people come together across various categorizations to practice sensing, responding, and emerging with each other. Hamera states that dance communities foster “queer intimacies” for bringing diverse groups of people into contact and conversation (2007, 209). Technique functions as the “social bedrock for imagining new ways of being together and being oneself (Hamera 2007, 18).”

The technique in folk dance exceeds movement and posture in that dancers develop capacities to connect in ways that might not be feasible in other social contexts. Ideologies - often related to discourses of tradition - exist within

folk dance to control how our bodies should engage, feel, and align. Dance technique, however, goes beyond ideologies and works as a template for organizing and strengthening folk-dancing communities, providing them a common vocabulary and tactics to create something original and innovative, fantasies of traditions, embodied solidarities, and finally, a kinaesthetic sanctuary for post-urban people under the demands of torturing individuality.

### References

#### *Author's Private Archives*

- Jaana (pseudon.) 2019. Folk dance teacher and choreographer. Interview by author, Finland. Digital recording. 26 May 2019.
- Juho (pseudon.) 2019. Folk dancer. Interview by author, Finland. Digital recording. 28 May 2019.
- Laura (pseudon.) 2019. Folk dancer. Interview by author, Finland. Digital recording. 26 May 2019.

#### *Printed and Digital Sources*

- Buckland, Theresa J. 2018. Liberating Tradition: Gender Politics in Late Twentieth Century English Revivalist Morris Dancing. In Daniela Stavělová & Theresa Jill (eds.), *Folklore Revival Movements in Europe post 1950. Shifting Context and Perspectives*. Prague: Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, 311–330.
- Hamera, Judith 2007. *Dancing Communities. Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hobsbawm, Eric 2012. Introduction: Inventing Traditions. In E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–14.

- Hoppu, Petri 1999. Symbolien ja sanattomuuden tanssi. Menuetti Suomessa 1700-luvulta nykyaikaan. Helsinki: SKS.
- Hoppu, Petri 2007. Nya riktningar i det finska Finland. In Egil Bakka & Gunnel Biskop (eds.) *Norden i Dans. Folk – Fag – Forskning*. Oslo: Novus, 571–574.
- Hoppu, Petri 2011. National Dances and Popular Education – The Formation of Folk Dance Canons in Norden. In Karen Vedel (ed.), *Dance and the Formation of Norden: Emergences and Struggles*. Trondheim: Tapir, 27–56.
- Hoppu, Petri 2013. Other Flesh: Embodiment in Couple and Group Dances. In *Nordic Journal of Dance* 4 (2), 32–45.
- Hoppu, Petri 2014a. Encounters in dance and music. Fieldwork and embodiment. In Fiskvik, Anne Margrete & Stranden, Marit (eds.) *(Re)Searching the Field. Festschrift in Honour of Egil Bakka*. Bergen: Fakbokforlaget, 151–159.
- Hoppu, Petri 2014b. The Indigenization of Swedish and Hungarian Elements in Finnish Folk Dance. In *Narodna umjetnost* 51 (1), 71–87.
- Kapper, Sille 2013a. Estonian Folk Dance: Terms and Concepts in Theory and Practice. *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 54, 73–96.
- Kapper, Sille 2013b. Muutuv pärimustants: kontseptsioonid ja realisatsioonid Eestis 2008-2013. Tallinn: Tallinn University.
- Kurkela, Vesa 1986. Tanhuten valistukseen. Musiikkikasvatus ja perinnetyö Suomen demokraattisessa nuorisoliitossa. Helsinki: Työväenmusiikki-instituutti.
- Nilsson, Mats 2007. Nytraditionalismen i Sverige. In Egil Bakka & Gunnel Biskop (eds.), *Norden i Dans. Folk – Fag – Forskning*. Oslo: Novus, 547–551.
- Nilsson, Mats 2017. *The Swedish Polska*. Stockholm: Svenskt visarkiv/Musikverket.
- Okstad, Kari Margrete 2007. Ny inspirasjon i Norge. In Egil Bakka & Gunnel Biskop (eds.), *Norden i Dans. Folk – Fag – Forskning*. Oslo: Novus, 561–570.
- Rice, Timothy 2008. Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethno-musicology. In G. Barz & T.J. Cooley (eds.), *Shadows in the Field. New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 42–61.
- Scollon, Ron & Scollon, Suzie Wong 2004. *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Suomen nuorisoseurat 2021. Tanssimylly 23.-25.4.2021 Tampereella. Accessed January 15, 2021. <https://nuorisoseurat.fi/toiminta/tanssi/tanssimylly/>
- Väätäinen, Hanna 2003. Rumbasta rampaan. Vammaisen naistanssijan ruumiillisuus pyörätuolitanssissa. Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag.