Dancing Who We Are
The Embodiment of Rai Ethnic Identity in Sakela Performance

Marion Wettstein

THE sakela dance of the Rai, who mainly live in the middle hills of Eastern Nepal, is the focus of this paper.¹ In many respects, this dance and its development can be regarded as a prime example of a folk dance that has been cultivated in a process revolving around the definition of ethnic identity.² A cursory glance round the globe reveals that (folk) dance is linked with ethnicity in many countries where the definition of ethnic identities is undergoing a process

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² During the discussion of this paper at the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya 2012 at which it was presented, the suggestion was made that the term ‘ethnic’ should be avoided and be replaced by ‘indigenous’. This, in my view, derives from the current debate in Nepal about which groups are indigenous to the country and which are not, with the implication that the respective rights should be seen in a different light. Since my paper is not related to this discussion, I will consciously use the terms ‘ethnic’ identity and ‘ethnic’ group.
of evolution, especially, but not exclusively, in the post-colonial context (for an overview see Reed 1998). Taking the sakela as its example, this paper addresses the question of why dance seems to represent such a powerful means in the process of building identity. It approaches this question primarily from the perspective of the somatic aspects of dance and song. First, I shall take an ethnographic look at the dance itself and its context; afterwards I shall track the political and historical processes by which the dance has become so closely linked to the Rai ethnic identity in Nepal over the last few years. Drawing on this example, the last section will outline why, in what respect, and under which conditions such concepts as ‘somatics’ or ‘embodiment’ may be regarded as useful models for explaining the effectiveness of dance in shaping feelings of ethnic belonging.

As an experiment in trying to let readers get as close as possible to the somatic experience of dance, I shall introduce each of the following paragraphs with a semi-fictive preamble. The aim of these brief introductions is to evoke an emotional reaction that will hopefully create a suitable atmosphere that helps establish empathy with the dancers in their physical, emotional, and cognitive realities.

An Ethnographic Background to the Sakela Dance

Sweat was running down her temples. Her black hair was adorned with a gold-coloured, ornamented disc, and she was dressed in a traditional red velvet top and a black wrap skirt with white dots. The young girl tirelessly followed the ever-repeating dance steps with enormous pleasure. Once in a while she joked with the young man dancing next to her. While he jumped about wildly in his jeans, white T-shirt, and fashionable sunglasses, she tried to perform the hand gestures and footsteps as correctly and with as much distinction as possible: ‘Come-come’, her hands said simultaneously with those of all the other dancers. And, again, ‘Come-come’, this time she waved towards a friend who was standing outside the circle of dancers, still undecided. The dance had just started, and her friend in a pink mini dress and high heels
purposefully put on a bored face. But, she was unable to resist the call of the rhythms for long and joined the circle of dancers, just as elegantly as the elderly gentleman who was all smiles in his traditional waistcoat and who had come with bare feet. A group of women started loudly to sing a chorus: ‘Hāmro bhūme turyo!’ (We finished the worship of our land deity!) And everybody felt that this was exactly what the sakela dance was all about—or was it not?

The sakela (Dumi), which is called other names by different Rai groups and sometimes referred to as caṇḍī nāc (Nep), is performed among many Rai groups, although not all. In particular, the Chamling and Bantawa Rai are known for their passion for dancing it. The dancers, men and women, young and old, circle a ritual tree or leafy branch, dancing a repetitive basic step. Every once in a while they simultaneously perform gestures with their hands, their feet, or their whole bodies. For this, they follow a dance leader who indicates the beginning and determines the order of the gestural sequences. In between these sequences, which are often repeated three times each, rounds of basic steps are danced, to which the dancers may choose to sing some of the stanzas of the sakela song repertoire, or improvise stanzas on the spot. Also, when singing, the performers follow a song leader, who at times may be the dance leader as well.

The themes that are performed in the bodily gestures can be categorised into the following: agricultural work involved in planting and harvesting (such as scattering the seeds, binding the seedlings, weeding, hoeing, planting the paddy, cutting the ripe crops, drying the crops, threshing, collecting, carrying them in a basket,

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3 Sakela is the most commonly used term in a ‘Nepalised’ pronunciation among the Dumi, whereas sakala (səkələ) would be the proper Dumi pronunciation according to one of the few remaining native speakers in Halkum village. Sak(h)ewa is the most commonly used term in Chamling or Bantawa.

4 Some ethnic activists are trying to convince people to avoid the term caṇḍī nāc for the sakela dance, as they believe it is a designation given to the dance from outsiders, especially from Hindu communities who interpret it as a form of devotion to the Hindu goddess caṇḍi, which is considered inappropriate.
putting them in storage, cooking, and eating); leisure activities (such as combing one’s hair, oiling one’s hair and face, looking into the mirror, placing a tika [Nep] on one’s forehead, plucking flowers, fixing them in one’s hair, threading a garland, playing the binayo [Nep, Jew’s harp], walking to the market); imitations of animals, many of which have mythological significance (such as the tiger, monkey, frog, lizard, flea, tortoise, butterfly, fly, and a whole set of different birds); pure ‘foot’ movements; and framing gestures of greeting, respect and farewell. Among the Dumi Rai, the community on which my research focuses, the bodily gestures are mostly called sili (Dumi). Sili, however, is also used as a general term for the sakela dance as a whole, for certain sequences that belong together, and also for the movements a shaman (sele dhāmi, Dumi/Nep) performs in his nightly healing rituals. Occasionally, the word is used as a general term for every choreographed movement within Rai culture (as, for example, the movements of the māruni dance, Nep). This, however, is rather uncommon. The term is not used at all to describe classical Nepali dance. In this paper, I shall limit the term sili to describe a single unit of gestural movement. It is very difficult to assess how many different sili are known throughout the Rai region. Among the Dumi Rai, I witnessed and documented around 100 different sili, but I have been told of another 80 without as yet having seen them performed (cf. also C.B. Rai 2008/2065 BS). The stanzas that are sung while dancing may correspond thematically to the single sili, but they may also focus generally on the seasons in which the dance is performed—planting and harvest—or, as is often the case, they tell of love and romance.

Among the Dumi Rai, most songs for sakela dancing are

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5 For a different perspective on specifically the Dumi Rai, see von Stockhausen in this volume. Further ethnographic information about the Rai in general can be found in Femenías in this volume (Bahing Rai), Allen 1975, 1976 (Thulung Rai), van Driem 1993 (Dumi Rai), Ebert and Gaenszle 2008 (Kirat Mythology), Gaenszle 1991, 2002 (Mewahang Rai), Hardman 2000 (Lohorung Rai), McDougal 1979 (Kulunge Rai), Nicoletti 2006 (Kulunge Rai), or Schlemmer 2004 (Kulunge Rai).
nowadays sung in Nepali, not in Dumi. The Dumi language is only rarely spoken in the region today, mainly in the regions around Makpa village and among a few families in Halkum village in Khotang district. As the dance groups are mostly composed of participants from many different villages, it would be impractical even in Makpa to sing the sakela songs in Dumi. In my research, I was only able to collect ancient stanzas in the Dumi language from three elderly people. The text of the song, which might be titled the dolokuma (Dumi) song, on account of its chorus, suggests that the sakela dance is much more closely linked to Dumi mythology than is visible at first glance. But, this is another story and shall be told another time.

Traditionally, the sakela dance is not danced the whole year round. It is closely linked to a certain ritual which is performed once, or, among some groups, twice a year, mostly in the months of Baisākh (April/May, Nep) and Maṅsir (November/December, Nep)—preferably around the full moon. Depending on the season, these rituals are also called ubhauli and udhauli (Dumi). In spring, a ritual called bhume pujā (worship of the deity of the land or soil; Nep) is performed over the entire Rai area, in some groups with a strong emphasis on the sakela dance, in others without any dancing at all. In most Rai groups, the bhūme pujā is the ritual basis for the dance. Among the Dumi Rai, for instance, a shaman (a sele dhāmi or a nāgire priest; Dumi/Nep) is in charge of conducting the ritual at the specially designated place where the bhūme deity lives (bhūme thān; Nep). Usually, the deity, which may be male or female, is manifested in small stones that are covered underground throughout the year. During the pujā, they are dug out and presented to the community. A female pig is offered by the community and cocks and hens may be offered communally or by individual households. In a second pujā, the jalim puja (Dumi/Nep), fresh maize plants are offered, either at a specially designated place or in the house that is considered the first house of the

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6 For a discussion of the Dumi language, see also van Driem 1993.
settlement (tupsumi kim; Dumi). Local variations of these ritual activities may include an emphasis on the so-called inkhuli (yinkhuli) thān (Dumi/Nep)—although it has not yet been established with certainty what inkhuli means\(^7\)—or, on specific important places in the history of the individual villages, especially in the Makpa region. Often, there is a taboo on planting activities for three days once the ritual has taken place, after which the actual planting season starts.

In villages where the sakela dance is part of the ritual, it is usually performed by specially rehearsed ritual dancers (masumadi, an umbrella term for male and female; Dumi) during the pujā itself while the other attendants are mainly the audience. Towards the afternoon, large circles of lay dancers may assemble at another spot (the school grounds for example) and dance for the fun of it. The ritual dancers and the shaman may join in for some time and, depending on the mood, the dances may continue through the night, sometimes until the next morning. At some point in the night or the next morning, the dance will be officially ended (sili märne; Dumi/Nep), after which it is forbidden in this specific village to dance sakela until the next season, or the next year.

Because dancing is such fun, the villages in Dumi Rai region, for instance, have developed a special timeframe for their bhūme pujā so that the rituals in the different villages do not all take place on the same day, but one after the other over a period of one or two weeks, with only a few of them overlapping. This allows passionate dancers to travel from village to village and dance at several sakela events. After this, they are well rehearsed and may take part in one of the secular dance competitions that have been organised for some years now in the bigger villages and market places in the district.

\(^7\) In some Dumi Rai villages the inkhuli is an old grinding stone placed somewhere in the fields (for example, Halkum village), an old water source (for example, Daregauda village), or a special stone (for example, Makpa village).
Identity Processes, Cultural and Political Activism, and the Sakela Dance

On the other side of the circle of dancers, which had grown much larger within a few seconds, the cymbal players now forced the pace. ‘Ahure-e-e, wa-wa-wa-a, soi-soi-soi!’ the singers shouted excitedly in response as it started raining heavily on the grounds of Tundikhel in central Kathmandu. Unimpressed by the rain or by the voice yelling over the loudspeaker that was trying to convince the audience of the importance of one’s own culture, language, and religion, the dancers proceeded to circle the leafy branch that had been stuck in the ground. The circle of dancers had no mind to listen to the speech of the political leader on the stage, who was emphasising that dancing the sakela was a crucial part of Kirat Rai culture. Of course, it was, they had always known it, and they had always danced it—just as the forefathers had always danced it. With one difference: their forefathers had not worn high heels.

A circle of dancers performing a sakela dance during the bhūme pujā (annual ritual for the deities of the soil or land) in the Dumi Rai village of Sabru, Khotang District, Eastern Nepal, May 25, 2011 (Photo by Alban von Stockhausen).
And they certainly had not danced the ‘mobile phone sili’. Actually, was it grandpa who had said that they had not danced at all during bhūme pujā in his days?

The sakela dance and the bhūme pujā have seen a tremendous revival over the last decade or so. In the Dumi Rai region alone, five to six new bhūme thān have been inaugurated in the last few years, each of which has to be attended with annual rituals and dancing from the year of its instalment onward. And, each will add a new station to the dance calendar kept by the people passionate about dancing. When I first became interested in the sakela dance among the Dumi Rai some 10 years ago, it was regarded as nearly extinct and only a few elderly people, those who had been ritual dancers all their lives, still danced it. But, within a few years, sakela became very popular in both the villages as well as the urban surroundings of Kathmandu and Dharan. Some Rai groups who traditionally had not practised the dance suddenly started to organise lessons for their youth, and the youth loved it. If one visits a sakela event today, the majority of dancers will be young people. The sili are copied from those groups that had always known a large range of them—notably the Chamling and Bantawa Rai—and new movements, albeit mostly referring to traditional culture, are also invented. Similarly, the sakela dance is becoming more and more popular in the diasporas, as evidenced by the many YouTube videos that have been posted online in the last five years.

In my view, the revival and implementation of the sakela dance is to a large extent an effect of the agenda of the Kirat Rai Yayokkha—the cultural and political ethnic umbrella-organisation of the Kirat—and its many sister- and sub-organisations, which all promote the ethnic and political identity of the unified Rai or Kirat. Currently, the Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, and Yakkha are all subsumed under ‘Kirat’. Among these four groups, traditional dances that move in circles around a ritual centre are of great importance. The Yayokkha organises major events and
gatherings throughout the year, many of which take place in Kathmandu. On such occasions, political and cultural leaders address the audience, emphasising the importance of maintaining one’s culture. And the factors that prove most popular among the Rai are the local languages; the local customs, including the shamanic religious practices and rituals; and the local dances, in particular, the sakela dance.

Whenever a formal cultural gathering takes place, there will be at least one group invited to perform a sakela dance, either on stage or together with the audience. Dance competitions with awards of considerable sums of money are held each year, and proper dance groups have formed over the last few years that rehearse their performances on a regular basis. Such dance groups also ensure that their members are accurately dressed in traditional attire when they perform, and traditional dress has become associated with the sakela dance in general among the Rai.

It is interesting to note that cultural practice as a means to express and reinforce ethnic identity does not seem to have the same importance throughout Nepal in the processes of identity formation that have been taking place since the 1990s. As the example of the Thangmi shows (Shneiderman 2009), some ethnic groups in Nepal prefer to focus on basic rights and development rather than on cultural preservation in their ethnic self-definition (Shneiderman 2009:117). Shneiderman argues that unlike India, Nepal does not have an affirmative action system, and basic rights are not secured in the highly corrupt state. The affirmative action system in India attaches certain rights to a specific definition of ethnic culture, which, in turn, is objectified through clearly describable ritual and cultural practices. The lack of such a system in Nepal has thus, among the Thangmi at least, shifted the focus away from cultural practice when it comes to defining ethnic identity. For the Rai, who in terms of numbers outweigh the Thangmi by far, this argumentation does not apply. Among them, the focus on cultural practice is very strong. When considering the reasons for this difference between two ethnic groups which, in the
opinion of some,⁸ might even belong to the same major group of the Kirat in Nepal, we can look to Pfaff-Czarnecka who suggests that ‘[w]ithin relatively short spans of time, strategically important signs can be interpreted anew, or they may acquire additional conditions’ (2003:137) and

[p]rone to ‘capture’ are religious elements, rituals, specific habits and customs, historical notions, ritually important sites, cultural notions considered (by some people) as elements of the national culture, dress, and others….Indeed, in Nepal specific cultural or religious notions were turned into ethnic markers only after the ethnic activists sought to define their identity in reaction to the prevailing public figures of the national society and of the minorities in particular (2003:138).

That is to say, after the 1990s, Pfaff-Czarnecka sees the process of ethnicity formation in Nepal in the light of symbolisation. In my view, we can, however, see a process beyond that, especially when observing the role that the folk dance sakela assumes for the Rai. I will come back to this in the next section. For now, I shall take a closer look at the way and extent to which the sakela dance is currently incorporated into the agenda of the Yayokkha.

For some years now, sakela performances have been organised by the Kirat Rai Yayokkha on the grounds of Tundikhel in central Kathmandu on the occasion of the annual ubhaulil/udhaulil festivals. These events are announced for a specific date by the Yayokkha central committee of Kathmandu with a formal, written invitation sent to all cultural and activist organisations, associations, and dance groups. Pitched along the demarcations of the grassy square in Tundikhel are rows of colourful tents, some of which offer food, while others sell books or provide information about groups and associations. On the main ground surrounded by these stalls,

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⁸ Mainly individual influential cultural or political activists belonging to different local ethnic groups.
several leafy branches have been stuck into the ground at some distance from one another. Some are surrounded by a circular barrier of rope demarcating a dancing space around the branch at the centre. On one side of the square ground is a stage with loudspeakers and microphones for addresses given by the invited speakers. The invitation will usually be for 9 o’clock in the morning, but hardly any participants turn up at that time. Only some officials and the appointed shaman of the Kirat Rai Yayokkha may turn up at that early hour to perform a small ritual.

Most people arrive at around 11 o’clock and Nepali music will be played from CDs over the loudspeakers on stage. Around 12 o’clock, the official opening of the festival will be held with speeches that may go on for an hour or two, and in the early afternoon, the appointed shaman will officially inaugurate the first dancing circle. Speeches may continue the whole afternoon, including reading out the list of donors who have backed the festival and the announcement of future events. In the meantime, many more participants will have joined the festival and the dancing circles will have become occupied by different groups, some of them official dancing groups from a specific region which will have brought banners and containers with rice beer to give to the dancers, while others may be composed of youths of mixed Kirat origin who are there to enjoy themselves. Between 4 and 6 o’clock in the afternoon the number of participants will usually have reached its peak, which on a good day may well be as many as 6000 people. After the main speeches are finished, the official event is over and the stalls are slowly taken down. But, some participants may choose to stay until much later. Many dancing groups move on to private homes or smaller compounds after the event and continue dancing and singing there.

This new type of sakela performance is certainly not just an urban phenomenon. Sakela melā (sakela fairs; Nep) are also organised in rural areas. One of the most prominent examples may be found near the pilgrimage site of Halesi, on Tuwachung Hill. Merely 10 years ago, nobody danced on Tuwachung Hill, and
only a few old people who lived near the hill used to know that on its ridge there were historical stones that were closely linked to the mythology of the Rai. These stones, they used to say, were the place where the two mythological sisters, Toma and Khema,9 settled and invented the craft of weaving. A local committee of cultural activists took up this story and within a few years, Tuwachung Hill had grown into a centre of worship and sakela dance, with a big festival held twice a year at ubhuali and udhuali. When I attended the festival in summer 2011, I estimated that there were 4000 participants, most of them from the surrounding Chamling Rai region, but also from other Rai groups as well as other castes. Besides the spontaneously formed sakela dance circles, around 15 different official dance groups attended. Apart from the festivals in Kathmandu and Dharan, the Tuwachung festivals may thus be regarded as among the largest sakela dance events nowadays.

These melā and festivals for ubhuali and udhuali still incorporate a ritual component, if only in that there is always a shaman present who inaugurates the event, or conducts a minimal offering to the central tree or branch. In the secular dance competitions, however, the original ritual elements are often completely missing. Generally speaking, a certain degree of ‘folklorisation’ has taken place over the last 10 to 15 years: a process of detaching the dance from its original ritual context and placing it in a new form of performance that stands for itself and is symbolically linked to ethnic identity, conservatism, and traditionalism. And, within this, there is also room to come up with new ideas. Experiments with newly invented sili and new forms of performing old sili could be observed in many dance competitions. At present, such inventions are still sanctioned by the organisers of the dance competitions and shows. They are regarded as ‘not original’ and innovative dance groups, for example, are not awarded prizes at dance competitions. But, slowly, the notion that tradition is evolving and does

9 The names used among the Dumi Rai. Other variations in different Rai groups may also include Toyama, Tawama, Gramu or Grame for Toma and Khiyama, Laju, or Lasme for Khema (personal communication Chatur Bhakta Rai).
not have to be fixed or ‘pure’ and ‘original’ is seeping in. Even the more conservative powers in the cultural organisations have recently confided to me that it is okay when young people dance a mobile phone sili. Put simply, this new trend in attitudes towards the dance reveals that sakela describes the reality of people’s lives, and if the reality shifts from agriculture to office work, then this is what the new sili will be about. However, until now the majority of sili are still concerned with the rural lifestyle, as described above, and it is generally understood that the dance describes the life of the forefathers rather than the life of the present.

We can observe worldwide that so-called ‘traditional’ dances are used by political interest groups to implement the notion of ethnic identity. We also find examples of how dance has been used to inscribe propaganda, or how it has been banned by power holders because of its potential in resistance movements (see the case of Greece, Loutzaki 2001, or the Chinese revolution, Strauss 1977, and the general overview in Reed 1998). Referring to Meyer (1995), Reed states that ‘[d]ance is a powerful tool in shaping nationalist ideology and in the creation of national subjects, often more so than are political rhetoric or intellectual debates’ (1998:511). The crucial question here is: Why? Can we explain this transformative power of dance in general? And, if so, can we explain why certain dances, as in our case study, the sakela, seem to be especially apt for this purpose? In the following section, I shall approach this question in light of studies on embodiment and the somatics of dance. My aim is to try to grasp the essence of what ‘embodiment’ really means in terms of the link between dance practice and political propaganda.

Effects of Somatic Experiences and Embodiment in Dance Related to Identity Processes

Now the dancers had to concentrate on the dance leader, who had just announced the beginning of a new dance movement by yelling a loud ‘Hey!’ and swinging his arms down to catch everybody’s attention. A general
jumpiness could be felt—which sili comes next? The dance leader knew very well how to please his circle. He smirked and put his hands behind his buttocks and rubbed his palms together three times in time to the cymbals. Delighted squeals and giggles accompanied him and the circle followed him as he performed the jhinge sili, the movement of the fly cleaning itself. Everybody enjoys the jhinge sili, and soon the songs accompanying the dance told of romantic love, disappointed hopes, deep feelings of belonging, and of never forgetting each other despite the separating mountains. Time became irrelevant, the rain was not felt, bodies moved, driven by a mysterious force. Misty-eyed faces drifted into a half trance. For a short time, or for a timeless moment, many a mind and body dissolved into integrated oneness.

Dance and song, especially when combined, have a great potential for generating moments of oneness, and, when performed in a group, the experience of togetherness, of social unity on top of that, is amplified. And, this might be a reason, as current arguments go, why dance—whether employed intuitively or out of calculation—is such a powerful element in the processes of casting ethnic identity. But, how can we understand this moment of ‘oneness’? Why and how does it occur?

Cognitive scientists agree that in the Western world it was Descartes who in the 17th century determined the paradigm of the separation of mind and body, known as ‘Cartesian Dualism’. This paradigm defined the mind as the sole seat of knowledge (Descartes 1637, 1641). For many years, the mind-body relation was discussed chiefly in terms of what determined what, assuming there was even a link between the two, which was denied at times (for a counter-critique, see Broad 1918). Only recently has a new understanding of an interrelationship developed, along with an integrative approach. A major influence in this new understanding of mind and body in Western philosophy was Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 1945, Tanaka 2011), even if other thinkers, notably MacMurray (1935), had deemed the Cartesian Dualism problematic long before, and viewed man as an integrated being of body, mind, and emotion.
Similarly, in the field of movement and dance studies, an important new approach has developed since the beginning of the 20th century that has a more holistic understanding of the body-mind-emotion complex. Most influential in this approach have been practitioners and thinkers of dance and movement such as Rudolf Laban, who developed a new form of dance movement and a dance notation (Labanotation); Frederick Matthias Alexander and Moshé Pinchas Feldenkrais, who both developed movement techniques to reduce not only physical but also mental stress and pain (Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais Method). Equally influential has been the expressive movement art of Eurythmy designed by Rudolf Steiner and Marie von Sivers and which was developed further by Gerda Alexander (Eutony); and the ‘sacred dances’ of the spiritual and esoteric guru George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, who, for instance, had a strong influence on theatre director Peter Brook (see his film Meeting with Remarkable Men). Most influential in the second half of the 20th century, especially in North America, was the formulation of the concept of somatics10 by Thomas Hanna in the 1970s (Hanna 1970, 1980, Batson 2009).

Mainly inspired by the Feldenkrais Method, it quickly flourished and brought a general upswing to therapeutic and educational movement techniques that focus on the awareness of body sensation, movement and conscious embodiment, especially for the treatment and fast relief of chronic pain. Drawing on neurological research, Hanna’s somatic concept is designed to eliminate unwanted muscle tension, even among the elderly and those who have suffered many years of pain, through isolated, conscious, active body movement. Somatic techniques, of which many have evolved since Hanna, proved to be attractive for pain therapy and also for (dance) movement education. Many of these concepts draw on the healing effects of ancient Asian body-mind techniques, such as yoga, that was westernised and reformulated for an international

10 Derived from the ancient Greek term ‘soma’, meaning as much as ‘from the body’.
following around the turn of the century. While in dance studies the focus is placed on active, conscious embodiment, the subconscious influences between mind, body, and emotion are of great concern in the fields of psychosomatic research and therapy. And, whereas in Western medicine, somatic means anything body-related, generally speaking, the term ‘somatics’ is applied today to describe processes of body-mind integration. Put simply, over the last century, thinkers and practitioners of movement and dance studies have recognised that it seems possible to actively or passively link a thought pattern or emotional pattern to a physical movement pattern as well as de-link it again, at any age.

With these concepts of embodiment and somatics at the back of our minds, we may suggest an explanation as to why dance might be such a powerful means for the process of ethnic identity building. If a collective folk dance like the sakela, which lasts for several hours and is infused with positive emotions and joyful moments of oneness, is combined with constant messages of ethnic pride and identity, the experience of oneness fuses with the notion of ethnicity, and, likewise, becomes integrated into the total experience. In cultures that were never strongly influenced by Cartesian Dualism—that is to say, many parts of the non-Western world, including the former colonies—bodily movement and dance always continued to be important aspects of everyday life. The conceptual framework and the practice concerning the transmission of knowledge include these aspects today. This is the case with the sakela dance. As we saw in the beginning, the gestures of the dance consist mainly of an inventory of movements from agricultural techniques, knowledge about the biosphere that is linked to mythology and oral tradition, and topics of socially accepted leisure activities. The sakela dance had, therefore, once been a strong means of teaching and learning relevant cultural techniques and values among the Rai. The tradition of learning through dancing is still deeply rooted in society, and could hence easily be revived in the context of learning a new set of values: that of ethnic identity.

In theory, one might suggest that any message can be fed into
the minds of people through the medium of dance. However, the essential condition is that people do actually dance, and that they enjoy dancing, so that a positive emotion is linked to the practice. Many folk dances are communal dances, and are by nature linked to notions of togetherness, and in-group identification, and are therefore highly suitable as a means of inscribing ethnic identity. It is not surprising that it was precisely the *sakela* dance that was chosen from among the many dances of the Rai—whether consciously or unconsciously—to become the ‘national’ dance of the Rai. Of the Rai dances, the *sakela* is the one with the highest integrative function. Everybody can join in and the circle of dancers not only symbolises but also physically enacts the whole society moving around an *axis mundi*.

**Conclusion**

As always in Nepal, dusk had come quickly and the dancers were now moving in the near dark. Thanks to the full moon they could still follow the dance leader who meanwhile, after several hours, had arrived at the movements of weaving. Even though weaving was a disappearing craft among the Rai, nearly all of the dancers were able to perform the *sili* of plucking cotton, turning the spinning wheel, and weaving fabric. When the cloth was measured and folded, and the belt and turban were bound, the dance leader indicated the last *sili*: ‘Bye-by’, the hands waved in the circle of dancers, ‘bye-by’, and ‘bye’ again. The cymbals stopped abruptly and the circle quickly dissolved. This was the end of this year’s spring *sakela* dance in Kathmandu. It was suddenly quiet on the grounds of Tundikhel and within a few minutes the people had scattered in all directions. But wait. Behind one of the colourful tents a pair of cymbals started to play anew. The night was still young…

As we have seen, the instrumentalisation of the *sakela* dance for the construction of an ethnic ‘we-feeling’ in a national political agenda is a relatively recent phenomenon. We may recall here that Pfaff-Czarnecka (2003) pointed out the volatility of
the meaning of symbols, the rapid change that can be observed in the way a certain phenomenon gets attached, detached, and re-attached to diverse symbols. There would be no point, therefore, in insisting on the notion that a certain practice (the sake-la dance) is attached to a certain meaning (Rai ethnic identity). All we can observe are the changes and shifts the dance undergoes in time in all its aspects. While considering the reasons why certain practices, such as dance, are more prone to being utilised in processes of ethnic identity construction, we may acknowledge the importance of the somatic experience linked to the emotional experience in this process. Anthropology has seen a long tradition of emphasising symbols and meaning. But since the concept of embodiment has taken shape, especially among thinkers like Mauss (1934) and Merleau-Ponty (1945), and to some extent taken hold of anthropology (see Csordas 1990,
Kersenboom 1995, van Wolputte 2004, Mascia-Lees 2011), I believe we are coming a step closer to possible explanations of what happens within people in a process of restructuring or shifting identity in general. Nevertheless, I still consider that the notions of the bodily, physical processes that have been described by a few pioneer studies, especially in the field of the embodiment of movement in material culture (such as Ingold 2001, Keller 2001, Sennet 2008, or Noland 2009), have not found the widespread attention in anthropology that they deserve. Asking why specific dances are more suitable for these purposes than others, we might be well advised to pay more attention to the body and the physical world surrounding it, to the space the dances occur in, and to the interconnectedness of the inner emotions, somatics, and the mind in relation to the social outer world. As research about dance in Nepal is generally speaking still in its infancy, a large-scale comparative approach accounting for the phenomenological, somatic, emotional and identity aspects would be a promising endeavour in this era of great shifts in identity in Nepal.

References

11 Most research on Nepal that includes dance as a topic mainly focuses on other aspects, especially ritual, mythology, and musicology. Among the very few explicitly dance-specific approaches, we find, for example, the works of Schrempf 1999 (Tibetan cham dance), Berg 2008 (Sherpa Dumji dance), or parts in Shresthova 2011 (Bollywood dance in Nepal).


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