

6.5 Arts (Creative and Performing)

Mathur, Nita: Dance Ethnography in the Anthropology of India: Prospects and Possibilities. *The Eastern Anthropologist* 60, 3 & 4 (2007): 471-86.

Through a case study of the traditional classical dance of Bharatnatyam, the author explores here how the 'publically shared codes of representation' in a classical dance form are imbued with meaning and message in real life situations. Dance constitutes a vital component of the Tamil Brahmin culture, where gestures are used to relay knowledge outside performance. The method of research, which the author calls 'dance ethnography', looks at dance (i) as a kind of cultural knowledge which is an end in itself; (ii) through the local contextual information (social values, symbolic codes, beliefs) which constitute the framework within which dance is understood; and (iii) for an understanding of the social significance and meaning of dance movements.

The tradition of Bharatnatyam in Tamil Nadu was associated with service to the male deities by a distinct category of women called the *devadasis* (servants of the god). Bharatnatyam is still considered as a form of devotion. It consists of the stylized presentation of stories drawn from the sacred texts through gestures (*mudras*). Its influence is so deep that it also permeates everyday interactions, especially of women, and is a means for channelizing through fantasy the basic drives and emotions of a repressed society. The author then discusses the prospects and possibilities of this type of ethnography in India where there exist a multiplicity of dance forms and a continual interplay between folk and classical dance forms. The intervention of technology now complicates the relation between the performer and audience and opens a field of study of dance forms in relation to cultural values, identities and role archetypes.

See also Da Costa (9.2); McDonald (7.7); Subramanian (4.2)