

Article

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“THE PLACE OF DANCE IN HUMAN LIFE”

Perspectives on the Fieldwork and Dance Notation of Gertrude P. Kurath

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Deciding exactly where to begin when writing about Gertrude Prokosch Kurath (1903-1992) is a difficult task to say the least. Her interests and range of activities extended beyond the academic fields of dance ethnology, anthropology and ethnomusicology to which she contributed throughout her life, to dance performance, choreography, art history, administrative roles, and motherhood. However, exemplified in the corpus of her research and writings is an emphasis on dance research, for which two features are emblematic and significant: her progressive approach to fieldwork and her use of dance notation as a means of recording and analysis. Following a brief biographical sketch and a contextualization of Kurath within the field of dance ethnology, this article will discuss Kurath's approach to fieldwork with a particular focus on her work on Native American dance, and her development and use of a specific style of dance notation, also within the context of Native American dance.¹

Born in Chicago to musically and academically-inclined parents, Kurath was exposed early on to music and dance through Dalcroze Eurythmics taught by Rudolf Bode and through her family's relationship with Curt Sachs, author of *Weltgeschichte des tanzes* (*World History of the Dance*, 1937). Kurath studied dance and anthropology at the University of Chicago before earning a BA in 1922 followed by an MA in art history in 1928, both from Bryn Mawr College. During this same period, Kurath also studied music and dance in Berlin, Philadelphia, New York, and Rhode Island, and, from 1929-1930, she attended and taught classes

1. This article will largely focus on Kurath's research in Ontario and the North Eastern United States, as opposed to her work in Mexico and New Mexico, for which there is also a great deal of materials and writings.

at the Yale School of Drama. She was proficient in a number of dance forms, having studied with Riva Hoffman, a proponent of the Duncan dance style, and Doris Humphrey, among others (Kealiinohomoku 1992: 70). Despite her level of education and depth of experience, she was never affiliated with a university. Nevertheless, Kurath continually pursued research opportunities and produced a large corpus of books, articles and reports. It is her high level of productivity as well as her involvement in academic circles and professional associations which helps to centralize her in the history of dance studies in the twentieth century.

Kurath and Dance Studies

Dance studies have undergone many identity crises, numerous name changes, and have borne criticism from other academic fields. The insinuation was often that dance is not a serious or scientific subject due to its embodied nature and thus lesser status. Dance scholar Judith Lynne Hanna suggests that the reasons for the neglect of dance in academic circles are due also to factors of prejudice and the lack of “scientific” evidence such as notation in early dance studies, as well as from a disdain for the body.

Only recently have social scientists considered dance a significant element of human culture and behavior and therefore a legitimate subject of study.... the body was a victim of social snobbery — a brute linking the bourgeoisie to the lower classes and animal instincts (1979: 313).

With regard to the scientific, or, one might suggest, ethnographic nature of dance research, early studies of dance such as Sach’s *World History of the Dance* (1937) and Bernard Mason’s *Dances and Stories of the American Indian* (1944), and even later studies such as Reginald and Gladys Laubin’s *Indian Dances of North America* (1977), focus on description, and social and historical context, and largely ignore the details of movement, including notation and analysis. The tendency in early dance studies was towards observation and narrative accounts made from an etic perspective, an approach which lies in opposition to participative, embodied and emic perspectives which characterize more recent research in dance (Ness 2004: 123-144). However, equally absent from studies approached in either of these two contrasting ways is a prioritization of movement as an analytical factor, a feature which will be seen to be a pivotal element in Kurath’s research.

The following quote concerns exactly this issue of movement analysis and notation in dance studies:

One of the difficulties that has prevented progress in the field of the anthropology of dance being as rapid as that in, say, the anthropology of visual art, has been the need for a notation of dance movements that combines accuracy with some degree of readability for the non-dance expert (Gell 1985: 186-187).

Certainly, in comparison with musical transcription in ethnomusicology, dance transcriptions have appeared less frequently, possibly as a result of movement notation illiteracy among scholars in the fields of anthropology and ethnomusicology. According to Alfred Gell, scholars are "unlikely to undertake the task of learning complicated systems of hieroglyphics lightly" (1985: 187). As Kurath in her discussion of the training of dance ethnologists makes clear, dance research must be completed by those with training in a variety of areas including anthropology, kinesiology, dance notation, and music (1960: 247). Based on this list of varied subjects, it is easy to understand why dance research as a field has been slower to emerge than other fields and also why it has been claimed as a sub-discipline by more than one area of study. In addition to notation, Kurath is also adamant that dance scholars, whether anthropologists or ethnomusicologists by training, must have practical dance experience, in the same way that ethnomusicologists must have a musical background. Practical dance experience is by no means uncommon in many prominent dance scholars' personal histories. As Kaeppler points out:

[Kaeppler, Hanna, Royce and others] were anthropologists first, even though in our dark and secret pasts we had all been dancers. That is, we knew how to perform and analyze movement, whether or not this knowledge was foregrounded or backgrounded in our publications (1991: 13).

The topic of dance in academia has, since the 1960s and 1970s, emerged as a legitimate and significant field, especially in relation to anthropology, folklore and ethnomusicology (Reed 1998: 504-505). Most dance scholars divide the history of dance research into two stages: pre and post-1960s, the latter being characterized by the introduction of the anthropology of dance and the work of scholars such as Royce, Hanna, Kaeppler, and Kealiinohomoku (Reed 1998: 505 and Hanna 1979: 314). The former period is characterized primarily by scholars such as Kurath and Boas. Although Kurath is often considered to

represent the pre-1960s research trends, it was a quote from her article “Panorama of Dance Ethnology” from 1960 which was influential and significant in connecting the study of dance with anthropology.

Any dichotomy between ethnic dance and art dance dissolves if one regards dance ethnology, not as a description or reproduction of a particular kind of dance, but as an approach toward, and a method of, eliciting the place of dance in human life — in a word, as a branch of anthropology (1960: 250).

Although Kurath is generally considered to be the pioneer of dance ethnology, and her role in the promotion of dance studies has been stated and restated in a variety of ways, there is a distance between her work and that of Kaeppler, for example, who does not credit Kurath with any substantial influence on the second stage of anthropological dance research post-1960s for reasons of Kurath’s “Euro-centric” and “product-orientated” approaches (Kaeppler 1991: 13). These criticisms are overly general, however, and do not take into account factors such as Kurath’s approach to fieldwork and her relationships with her subjects. Despite what some may point to as weaknesses in Kurath’s work, it is important to reference her as one of the first academics whose work in dance paved the way for the emergence of dance studies, if only because it is through Kurath’s active promotion of dance that the field was able to grow as it has since the 1960s. Kurath’s work both on a community level and internationally in inspiring interest in dance is as important to the field as her work, however product-orientated the latter may be. Always tactful, Kurath responds to her role as the “mother of dance ethnology” in her own words: “If I had a hand in its formation, it was accidental, the result of two decades of fumbling” (1974: 35).

Evidence of Kurath’s impact, apart from her extensive research, is found in important events and writings which demonstrate Kurath’s role in the acceptance of dance ethnology in the mid-twentieth century. In a discussion of the role of women in the Society for Ethnomusicology, Charlotte J. Frisbie names Kurath as one of ten female members who played a role during the formative years of the society (1991: 244-245). In 1956, Kurath became, significantly for the history of dance ethnology, the dance editor of *Ethnomusicology* for a period of fifteen years (Kurath 1956: 10-13): in fact, she had the longest formal association with the journal in its history (Nettl 2001: 4). Additionally, Kurath’s article, “Panorama of Dance Ethnology,” is considered to be a seminal work in the field of the anthropology of dance, largely based

on the ever-popular quote from the end of the article cited above which named dance ethnology as a branch of anthropology. As a point of interest, this quote statistically appears more than any other quote from Kurath or other dance scholars. Case in point, the passage is quoted three times between pages vii-34 of the Congress on Research in Dance 1972 conference proceedings, "In Honor of Gertrude P. Kurath" (Comstock 1974: vii-34). There is no question that the article has had an impact on subsequent dance research, if only for this one passage which appears scattered throughout writings on dance.

In the much-cited "Panorama of Dance Ethnology", Kurath explores dance ethnology from both a historical and current (to 1960) perspective. She touches on anthropological concerns, dance notation, music and dance analyses, technology, the training of dance ethnologists, and the future of the field. She attempted to provide a summarization of a burgeoning field, a summary which has been held up as the cornerstone for dance studies into the twenty-first century. Kurath's work in dance began many years before the 1960 article however, and many of her early works represent the beginnings of her future directions. A particularly strong example of this is one of her first full-length books, *Iroquois Music and Dance: Ceremonial Arts of Two Seneca Longhouses*. Her approach in this work is indicative of the format and treatment of similar topics throughout her life and can be summarized as the following process: catalogue, describe, analyze, and discuss. The same procedure, one which is methodical and inherently ethnographic, is utilized by Kurath in most of her writings, both short and long.²

Several accolades have been directed towards Kurath which further confirm the significance of her academic contributions, including a conference dedication in 1972 of the third conference of the Committee on Research in Dance, "New Dimensions in Dance Research: Anthropology and Dance — The American Indian". The UCLA Graduate Dance Ethnologists also honoured Kurath in 1986 at an annual forum. The Society for Ethnomusicology, with whom Kurath was associated since its conception in 1952, held a reception for her during which she was presented with a plaque. The Michigan State University Museum posthumously awarded her the Heritage Award in 2001, and in the same year, the National Folk Festival in East Lansing, Michigan

2. As of now, the most substantial bibliography is that by Kealiinohomoku and Frank J. Gillis (1970: 114-128).

also honoured her. Lastly, the Society for Ethnomusicology lauded Kurath again in 2001, this time in the form of a panel organized to pay tribute to her lifelong work (CCDR 2006: 3-4). Joann Kealiinohomoku and Frank J. Gillis produced a Special Bibliography for Kurath in 1970 spanning the years 1931-1970 and which included a listing of her major field trips and the materials collected. The most recent tribute to Kurath was in celebration of the centennial of her birth in 2003 by Cross-Cultural Dance Resources. The contributors to this last tribute included her daughter, Ellen Kurath, Charlotte J. Frisbie, Santee Smith, and others. The tone of the centennial publication is both friendly and personal in nature, and demonstrates the impact of Kurath on personal acquaintances as well as colleagues. The memory and legacy of Kurath have been well preserved, largely through the efforts of Kealiinohomoku and Ellen Kurath, as well as by continued reference to her by scholars.

Kurath in the Field

Kurath's approach to fieldwork was informed by the perspectives and methods of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists such as Béla Bartók, Alice Fletcher, and Frances Densmore at the turn of the century, as well as by the more immediate influence of William Fenton, Frank Speck and Curt Sachs, among others. However, Kurath's approach differed in some distinct ways from earlier eras of fieldwork in which "fieldwork and research were often separated.... Fieldwork and desk work could be seen as separable processes" (Nettl 2005: 139). Some of Kurath's initial work with Native American music was in fact in this stream, as in 1947 when she made the acquaintance of William Fenton, who, in addition to introducing Kurath to anthropology, also encouraged her observation and analysis of Native American dance. This was an aid to Fenton, as dance analysis was unfamiliar to him (Kealiinohomoku 1992: 70). Kurath's first major field trip in 1926 included the collection of materials on Algonquian dance in Philadelphia. After a ten-year gap, Kurath began her fieldwork in earnest, traveling through the United States, Mexico, and Ontario. The years 1945-1968 were Kurath's greatest in terms of field activity and productivity, averaging one to two trips a year, with only one year, 1959, in which there is no evidence that she did any significant fieldwork. Writing in 1966, Kurath notes that "after taking everything into consideration, I have concluded that I have been on some 50 field trips, ranging from four months to one day" (1972: 41).

Kurath's field trips involved photography, tape recording, filming, and note-taking, although she noted the following:

The audio-visual materials have been a means to an end, that is, the fuller comprehension of the dance and music. None of my field trips were record collecting projects. In fact, for four years I never used a camera or a recorder, but concentrated on the observation of the dances and on making friendly acquaintance with the people (1974: 38-39).

That being said, Kurath collected thousands of films, more than 370 slides, more than 80 tapes, and hundreds of photos which are stored and archived in a variety of locales across the United States and Canada. In Ontario, the Canadian Museum of Civilization preserves recordings, film footage, correspondence, printed works, and notes. The Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario, has a similar selection of material. In the United States, the American Philosophical Society has manuscript materials in the form of notes, transcriptions etc., as well as published works. In Arizona, Cross-Cultural Dance Resources directed by Kealiinohomoku houses films, recordings, manuscript materials, photographs, printed works, and correspondence.³ Additionally, other institutions such as museums and universities in the United States and Canada, preserve Kurath-related material. Although Kurath's intention was by her admission not collection or preservation, the products of her field experiences are ample and her monographs and articles include analyses and mention of hundreds of dances and songs, many with musical and choreographic transcriptions.

As a result of lacking a permanent affiliation with a university institution at any point in her life, Kurath relied on financial support from a variety of sponsors, such as the American Philosophical Society, the National Museum of Canada (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization), and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Additionally, Kurath found and provided her own money to fund research trips⁴: "Most of the time, she did not have grants; she simply had a car and a determination to find informants" (Malm 2001: 3). Kurath is unusual in the fields of anthropology, ethnomusicology and dance ethnology

3. Cross-Cultural Dance Resources has recently made available online a catalogue of the more than forty boxes of materials related to Kurath. The library was also the recipient of Kurath's extensive library by donation.

4. See Kurath 1974: 41.

because of the lack of university appointment. Malm points to nepotism as one reason for the situation which kept Kurath from working academically at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where her husband was employed (2001:3). However, Kurath was extremely involved in a variety of organizations and activities. A partial list includes dance editor for *Ethnomusicology*, dance consultant for *Webster's International Dictionary*, contributor to the *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legends*, founder of local dance clubs, founder of the Dance Research Centre, dance performer, lecturer and educator — the list continues at length, in addition to Kurath's numerous field trips and publications.

One of the characteristics of Kurath's work in the field was the emphasis she placed on participation and personal involvement with her subjects: "The best method of research is participation" (Kurath 2000:51). As an accomplished dancer with a performance career in her background, Kurath was able to not only observe the dances from the communities in which she worked, but was also able to learn and perform them. Kurath even adopted the name Tula, given to her by Native American friends, for use in performance and for lectures in the 1940s and 1950s.

Although she utilized a combination of recording, filming, photography, and note taking, she also observed a great deal and was an active participant: "My experiences as co-performer with the Sauk and Fox at Rock Island, Illinois, in 1945 and 1947, produced choreographic notes, not audio-visuals" (1972: 40). Her skills as a dancer and her familiarity with dance notation also allowed her the freedom of shorthand notation, the system to be discussed later in this paper. Her approach to research as a whole, as presented in "Research Methods and Background of Gertrude Kurath" (1974), is ethnographic in nature and follows linearly from the field to the laboratory to the theorization stage. Outlined in ten steps, this process can be seen in the formatting of Kurath's monographs and articles.

Native American dance and music, as mentioned previously, were a primary focus of Kurath's, although she also explored jazz, Western art music, and popular music. Although much of her fieldwork was based in Mexico and New Mexico, a large portion of her work and publications deal with the Native American traditions of Ontario and the United States, namely Michigan and New York State. A sense of Kurath's relationship with her subjects from these latter areas can be



Figure 1. Kurath (a.k.a "Tula") Performing the Mexican Hat Dance. (circa 1946, Levine 2002: Plate 7).

gleaned from the tone of her comments in the preface to *Dance and Song Rituals of Six Nations Reserve, Ontario*:

The success of my visits for either business or friendship, or both, when alone or in the company of my son or of friends, was due to the hospitality and cordiality of the Longhouse people (1968: v).

Kurath lists of some of the people, all women, who were her hosts: all were members of some of the central families from Six Nations — the Hill, Green, Jamieson, and Logan families. Additionally, the list of singers that Kurath consulted shows an emphasis on the same families, with the inclusion of the Lewis and Buck families and others. Kurath's closeness and familiarity with her subjects is a significant aspect of her fieldwork, one which predicts future approaches to the field of dance studies.

Gertrude Kurath's personal relationships with the Native people she worked with went far beyond the standard researcher/informant paradigm: Kurath considered these people her friends. She rejected the idea that in order to write objectively, personal distance must be maintained, and developed ongoing friendships with those whose musical lives she documented (Browner 2000: i-ii).

Santee Smith specifically discussed Kurath's unique relationship with the Iroquois community in the Six Nations in her contribution to the centennial publication for *Cross-Cultural Dance Resources*: "The work of Gertrude Kurath has indelibly merged Iroquoian song and dance in the developing path of dance ethnology. She herself has become a part of Iroquoian history" (Smith 2003: 5). Commenting further on Kurath's fieldwork, Smith writes that "her writing style with the use of first person narration and her photographs place her within the community and witness to the ceremonies" (5). According to Smith, fieldwork for Kurath was not always performed in the manner of the turn-of-the-century researchers of Native American dance and music; for her, it involved not only more participation in the music, dance and community, but also an entire life involvement in the work.

Indicative of this approach is that although in 1966 Kurath estimated fifty field trips over forty years, many of these trips were one day journeys, and, furthermore,

within Michigan, five field trips came to me in Ann Arbor, as a result of my ways and means of bringing the Indians to the town. Also, in

Michigan, many profitable sessions, though not true field trips, resulted from friendly visits by Indians to my home. Many observations of dances came about through stop-offs en route to something else, or on family vacations (1972: 41).

This style of fieldwork is reminiscent of Bruno Nettl's discussions of current trends:

Ethnomusicologists have redefined the "field" concept, contemplating their own home community and their personal musical culture, bringing the "other" into their home ground, and engaging in such traditional activities as pilgrimages and such modern phenomena as tourism (2005: 185).

In fact, although Kaeppler has described Kurath as "a pioneer of empirical, product-oriented studies in America," there is something infinitely more meaningful and pioneering in her work than simply the product. The following perspective on fieldwork by Michelle Kisliuk may provide some insight into Kurath's field experiences:

Coming to "share the same narratives" also means that we have come to affect other people's lives, and that we ourselves have been fundamentally affected, often in ways we cannot control. Field experience becomes worth writing about and reading as a result of full participation in the life of research (1997: 43).

Written five years after Kurath's death, this excerpt may indicate to what extent Kurath was looking forward to the future in her approach to the field. Although the products of her research may seem dated from the perspective of the twenty-first century, her field methodologies are far from dated; in fact, as Kealiinohomoku points out, Kurath was the first in dance studies to name an informant, Antonio Garcia, as co-author for *Music and Dance of the Tewa Pueblos* (1992: 70). In light of these details of Kurath's field experiences, it may not be overly presumptuous to suggest that Kurath was foreshadowing the redefinitions of fieldwork in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Kurath On Paper

To state that human movement is the basis of dance is not a revelation. What is surprising is that its detailed study has not more fully permeated all areas of dance research and that a conceptual framework and systematic approach of movement analysis applicable

for inclusion in varied research designs is still not widely accepted (Brennan 1999: 283).

Throughout her writings, both topical and methodological, and in her fieldwork methodologies, Kurath emphasized the role of notation in dance studies. In a personal field anecdote, she relates her experiences of running out to her car from the Long House during dances in order to jot down choreographic notes, as notes were prohibited during ceremonies and memorizing choreography for entire ceremonies was difficult (Thompson 1976: 36). Despite Kurath's insistence as early as the 1950s for its inclusion and use, dance notation does not as yet have a universal form and is rarely utilized in past or current dance studies.

Along with verbal description, dance notation is one of Kurath's primary analytical tools which she continually utilized and developed throughout her career. Dance notation as a system of recording movement has been in existence in a variety of forms since the seventeenth century and possibly before (Guest 1991: 1-5), although the use of notation systems in anthropological and ethnomusicological contexts is a relatively recent event, and Kurath is one of the first to fully utilize notation in publication. Labanotation is one of the primary systems associated with anthropological studies, by both Kurath and others, partially due to its non-genre-specific notational symbols and also to its original conception by Rudolf Laban as a universal movement matrix (Hutchinson 1977: 6).⁵ Kurath herself incorporated Labanotation in her early transcriptions, and recognized its usefulness for dance ethnologists (1960: 243).

Although Kurath is likely one of the most prominent proponents of dance notation in an anthropological context, the need for notation is echoed by others such as Drid Williams:

The best evidence that can be produced about a dance, a sign language, an exercise technique, a set of greeting gestures (or any other movement-based phenomena) is a written text of the movements themselves (218).

Dance ethnologists face similar issues to ethnomusicologists with regard to notation and transcription, including issues of prescriptive and descriptive notation, biases in the notational style, and underlying

5. Dance notation systems, such as the well-established Benesh notation, were conceived for notating specific dance forms, such as classical ballet. Morris notation, Sutton Dance Writing and Eshkol-Wachman notation are other systems utilized in dance studies, although to a lesser degree than Labanotation.

assumptions regarding the applicability of notation to cultural dance forms. Perhaps because of these difficulties and the prospect of such a daunting task, Kurath is the only anthropologist listed *circa* 1984 by Ann Hutchinson Guest to have developed an original form of movement notation. However, Kurath's educational background is broad, and her work is interdisciplinary; not only did she have the benefit of musical literacy, but her study of art must also have been an aid to her in the conception of the glyph drawings which characterize her transcriptions. Her artistic perception and skills may have also been an asset for shorthand notation. Furthermore, her familiarity with Labanotation, learned in the 1930s and 1940s, contributed towards her ability and desire to create a system of notation specifically tailored towards the dances she studied, primarily Native American dances.

Kurath's first specific discussion of her original system appeared in an article entitled "A New Method for Choreographic Notation":

Comparative choreography involves three factors: recording of visual patterns, discovery of psycho-religious functions, and study of cultural significance by a comparative display of materials. The latter ethnographic stages derive substance from the recorded facts (1950: 120).

The first factor is the one for which Kurath presents a solution in the form of a "graphic script" that incorporates three elements: ground plan, steps and music. These three elements coexist in all of Kurath's studies of Native American dances, most notably in her lengthier monographs: *Iroquois Music and Dance: Ceremonial Arts of Two Seneca Longhouses* (2000), *Dance and Song Rituals of Six Nations Reserve, Ontario* (1968), and *Tutelo Rituals on Six Nations, Ontario* (1981). As an example of her system in practice, Kurath presents a transcription of a Stomp Dance, *Gadašot* (see figure2).

Figure 2 demonstrates Kurath's integration of what she considers to be the pertinent elements of the Stomp Dance. The music is placed counterclockwise around the ground plan with the corresponding dance steps notated alongside the music. Gender, direction, step type, rhythm, and beginning and end are indicated with graphic symbols which resemble to some degree those utilized in Labanotation, an indication of the connection between Kurath's notation and the extant system.

Kurath fully explains the meaning and significance of each symbol in her system in *Dance and Song Rituals of Six Nations Reserve, Ontario*. As with musical notation, previous knowledge and familiarity with da

The figure shows a musical score for 'Gadašot'. At the top is a staff with a melody. Below it is a large diagram with a central arch containing the word 'gadašot' and two circled 'S' symbols. The arch is labeled with 'U' and 'V' above it. To the left and right of the arch are vertical staves with notes. Below the arch is a staff with a melody and lyrics 'wi be go ka wi ya'. A tempo marking '♩ = 104' is present. At the bottom is a legend for the notation symbols.

U	up	r. r. l. r.
V	down	l. r. r. l.
W	up	right hand first movement
X	down	right hand first movement
Y	up	right hand second movement
Z	down	right hand second movement
A	up	left hand first movement
B	down	left hand first movement
C	up	left hand second movement
D	down	left hand second movement

Figure 2. *Gadašot* (1950: 121).

dance notation are an asset, if not a necessity, when attempting to understand and decipher Kurath's transcriptions. However, in comparison with the complexity of Labanotation and Eshkol-Wachman notation, her system is relatively straightforward and logical both in appearance and interpretation. The reasoning behind the simplicity of her system is explained in the following:

My system of notation is based entirely upon practical experience. I know that there are systems that are wonderful for the modern dance, and I am familiar with these, but they are extremely complicated. In notating folk dance and Indian dances especially, we must have clarity and simplicity, and we also must be able to do it speedily. We need to have this material available to ethnologists, to people who are not specialists.... These notations should be of great value because, because I am the only one in this field and I simply cannot go everywhere (Thompson 1976: 35).

What Kurath attempts, similarly to other dance and music notation systems, is a detailed method which, while accurate, is also clear and concise. Although not explicitly stated, her attempts in dance notation have also been focused on making Native dance accessible through the transcriptions. Considering Kurath's attempts to promote dance research since the 1930s, "accessibility" certainly seems a fitting descriptor for her work in Native American dance.

Another difference between Labanotation and Kurath's system is the contrast of descriptive as opposed to prescriptive notation. Prescriptive notation implies the ability to reproduce the movement from the score. Kurath's system is descriptive notation, which literally refers to the description of dances in order to provide the material or "evidence" for analysis. For her, descriptive transcriptions, the product of shorthand note taking at or shortly after events, often led to comparative analyses, such as those which resulted in the publication of "Native Choreographic Areas of North America" and also to later works which discuss issues of acculturation and cultural change in Native American dance based on stylistic and choreographic comparisons (Kurath 1953, 1981). The descriptive qualities in Kurath's work remained the same in later works, the actual notation not differing overly much from her first attempts at notation and analysis. For example, the transcriptions in *Tutelo Rituals on Six Nations Reserve, Ontario*, the last of three major works based on research from Six Nations, show only a slight refinement of text hand and style in comparison with earlier examples (figure 3).

Changes include the separation of the ground plan and the notation, both music and dance, and the clarity of the ground plan. Otherwise, Kurath has remained faithful to the principals (and graphic symbols) that governed earlier works. Also common to all her dance transcriptions is an awareness and interest in the integration of movement and music, the only obvious shortcoming being what she admitted freely in the following:

Despite all of the field work and experimentation, the goal always seems out of reach. I really haven't figured out a clear device for integrating the artistic and cultural factors. It is a perpetual challenge, frustrating and exciting (1974: 38).

Today, this goal has still not been attained, although attempts are made, some in the same thread as Kurath and others in what appear to

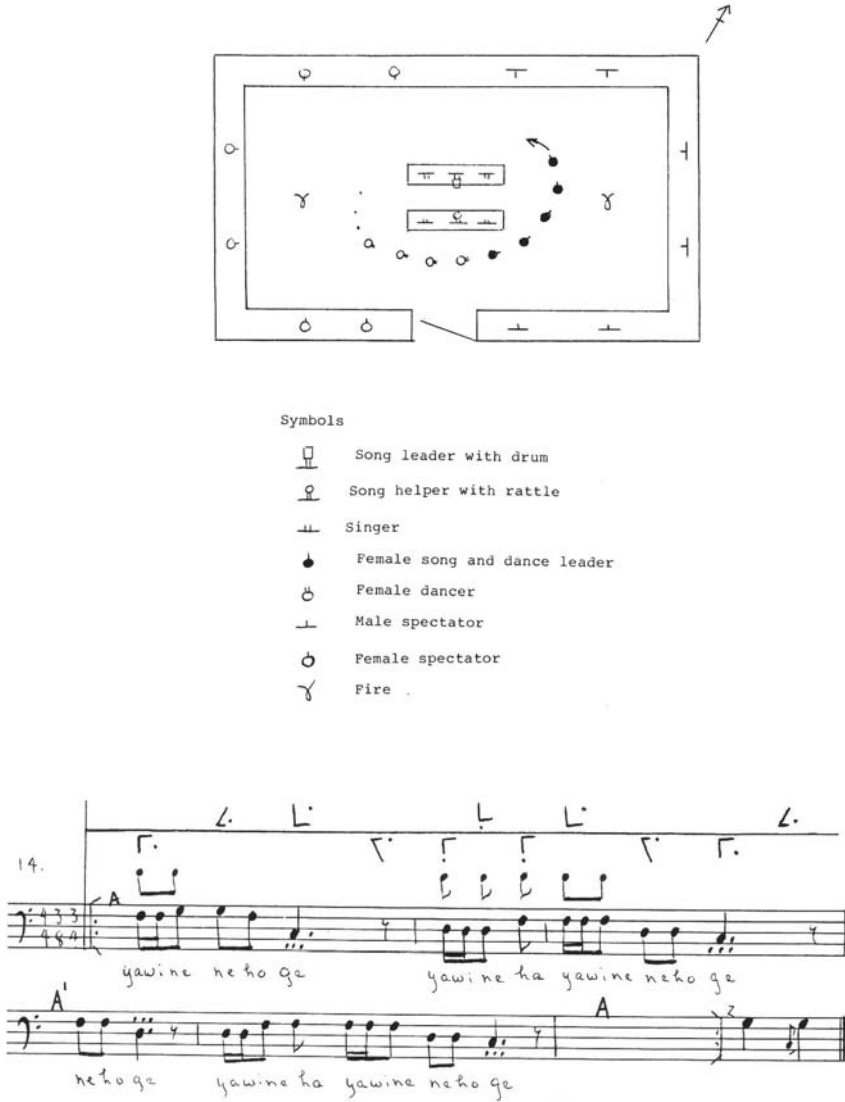


Figure 3. Harvest Dance. Ground Plan and Song 14 with Dance Notation (Kurath 1981: Figures 1.0 and 1.3).

be the opposite theme — little or no use of notation or movement study to study and understand the “place of dance in human life”.

Shirley Wimmer wrote that “[her] impressions of [Kurath] — her integrity, her encouragement to fledgling scholars, her honest interest in other people and their work — are still vivid” (1974: 32). Kurath’s impact, both personally and academically, is apparent in the words written in her honour by scholars from a range of fields and generations. Despite the chronological situation of Kurath in the realm of dance studies, her approaches to dance research remain seminal, relevant and worthy of study and revisiting. With regard to fieldwork and notation, her methodologies and products relay a comprehension of dance that resulted from her progressiveness and persistence in the field as a scholar, participant, communicator, and promoter of dance research. Kurath’s work, research which is only sampled in this discussion, was and remains a rich resource for the still burgeoning area of dance studies in the twenty-first century.

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