Spatial Symbolism, Ceremonial Dance and Masonic Ritual

Kelly X Ranasinghe
Spatial Symbolism, Ceremonial Dance and Masonic Ritual

Kelly Ranasinghe, 1 San Diego Lodge #35, Imperial Lodge #390

The anthropology of dance teaches us that movement is an expressive art and, alongside art and music, is a rich medium for nonverbal political and social communication. Ancillary to this concept is the notion of movement through space, and the creation, use and destruction of real and symbolic areas which serve a ritual purpose. This concept is not new. A well developed theory in this vein is the notion of sacred space, which has engendered informative discussions in a variety of academic areas, as well as compelling discussions about the function of sacred space in Masonic ritual itself. When these parallels between spatial symbolism and Masonic ritual are coupled with a discussion of ceremonial dance and movement, the similarities and comparisons are intriguing to the scholar of Masonic lore.

Masonic ritual, like dance, is an expressive art which both narrates and captures social and political messages. Like dance, Masonic ritual is a type of performance art which is intended to be seen by others not directly taking part in the ritual itself. Both ritual and dance deal with movement of the body and the perception of that movement from the position of the dancer\candidate, the audience, and the space itself, symbolizing the presence of a deity. A key facet in ritual (and in Freemasonry in general), is the consciousness of the presence of a deity.

However the similarities between ceremonial dance and ritual do not end at structural impression. Multiple parallels exist between ritual dance, and the ritual of Masonry. Both Masonic ritual and most forms of dance are concerned with the notion of one’s identity in relation to others. Certainly Masonic ritual is deeply connected with the identities of the people performing the ritual. Indeed, opening the lodge on the third degree begins with a reiteration of the identities of the major participants. This is not dissimilar to indigenous and folk dances, which, as noted by Walkowitz in his study on folk dancing are also concerned with identity; “…people dissemble when they speak; they perform identity when they dance.” 2

The similarities between dance during the colonial period and Masonic ritual can be a fruitful point of inquiry. Scholars note that “In some colonized societies, imitations of European dances became a means of upward mobility, much as the speaking of European languages and the wearing of European dress could become markers of prestige and status.” Masonic ritual, specifically the traditions of the Scottish Rite, also functioned as an internal society which granted lay members ‘titles of nobility’ which both paralleled and transcended the existing English social order.

1 Senior Warden, Imperial Lodge #390.

Consider also indigenous dance during the colonial period. Indigenous dances were mechanisms of preserving cultural identity, both of the colonizers and the colonized. This social preservation of values, mores and traditions through dance is an important corollary to Masonic ritual, which also is a medium for passing moral traditions through ritual allegory. Additionally, the importance of cultural preservation was not divested from the political message of many indigenous dances. Like these dances, Masonry has not been without controversy revolving around its fundamental message of equality. Scholars note that “The suppression, prohibition and regulation of indigenous dances under colonial rule is an index of the significance of dance as a site of considerable political and moral anxiety.”³ Masonic ritual, like indigenous dances during the colonial period, was pilloried by conventional authorities for its political overtones, and egalitarian message. Yet even while controversy is part and parcel of Masonic ritual and indigenous dance, traditional dances provides comfort to a culture in the sense that their tradition is being maintained. Likewise, scholars have noted that Masonic ritual throughout the colonial period, “gave Britons who moved in the empire a sense of connection to home and helped keep their memories of Old England, Ireland or Scotland alive.”⁴

Spatial Symbolism:

The notion of space symbolism in Masonic ritual has interesting similarities to ceremonial dance. Space in terms of ritual is very important, for the mere performance of a ceremony may create a sacred space, an area for worship, veneration or the transformation of the performer. As Reed notes “Interpreting movement, however, also requires a sensitivity to cultural space.”⁵ As in an understanding of ceremonial dance, spatial dynamics play a major part in the understanding of blue lodge ritual. The initial ceremonies of the three degrees captures the internalization of the outer into the inner, culminating in movement which is not merely two-dimensional, but has three-dimensional components mimicking descent and ascent⁶, a practice which generally symbolizes the veneration of substance.⁷ Indeed, the entire ceremonies of blue lodge masonry reflect a movement from one space into another, signifying at once an ascent (from the lower ground outside the temple up the steps into the Sanctum Sanctorum), an internalization (from the outside of the temple into the inner chambers), and a social transformation of the traveler (from the laity to the penitent).

---


⁶ Burial and ‘raising’ are examples of three-dimensional movement through space.

⁷ The veneration of matter by humans is usually accomplished by a lifting or ascent over the sight-line of man. Flags are raised aloft, statues are placed on pedestals, and in religious rituals sacred chalices are lifted above the congregation by a similarly situated religious official.
Change, is at the core of Masonic ritual, and ritual dance utilizes movement from one type of space to another as a method of symbolizing change. For instance, consider the Dance of the Curpites, a traditional ritual dance performed by male youth in the Tarascan mountains in Michoacan.  

In this ritual, young costumed male dancers called ‘curpites’ engage in dancing which plays on the courtship process of a young man addressing a young woman’s family. The ‘curpites’ are strangers, yet in the ceremony move from the outer courtyard into the inner portion of a dwelling, a typically familial area. As Bishop points out in her commentary on the Curpites, “To continue beyond the solar [outer courtyard] into the kitchen or into an interior room is to enter intimate space.” Likewise, the initiate in Masonic ritual traverses the space from the outside of the symbolic temple into the inner chamber, an intimate place of symbolic spiritual and social change.  

Ritualized dance may also have religious, as well as cultural components to it, which play into the use of space. Certain dance is designed to express, and in some circumstances create, a relationship between the dancer and the divine. This relationship between the ritual performer and the deity takes multifarious forms. The performer might be reiterating a religious tradition as a method of worship. The performer may also be attempting a direct experience of the divine through the dance, or mimicking divine experience for the benefit of others. What is uncontestable is that Masonic ritual inculcates aspects of the divine in all three of the degree ceremonies, notably the third. It is not unsurprising then, that, for instance, when a young Indian dancer likens her ritual dance to a ‘temple,’ and that her ritual dance functioned as a ‘temple’, the parallel of Masonic ritual physically mimicking the entry of an initiate into a spiritual temple, and the creation of an internal spiritual temple is evident.  

Finally, both ritual and dance can interpret, through bodily expression and the use of physical space, society itself. As described by one author commenting on the social uses of buildings, “…like domestic space, music and dance events can be used to order social life and give it meaning.” To that end, both ritual dance and Masonic ritual generally have a dualist  

---


approach to society. Masonic Ritual illustrates a fundamental social opposition by drawing a parallel between the conflict of virtue and impiety as illustrated by the ‘outer’ and the ‘inner’ portions of the candidate, the temple, and the physical space of the lodge room. Ritualized dance often accomplishes the same principle by drawing distinctions between the inner portion of man, characterized by insular movement, and the outer world, characterized by sweeping extroverted movement. Dualist and conflicting presences are prolific symbols in dance, and as mentioned above, these symbolic dualist illustrations often relate to a relationship between humanity and the divine, the fundamental concept in Masonic ritual.

It should lastly be noted that at the inception of each ritual the degree candidate’s attention is drawn, physically and somewhat violently, to his inner physical being. He is confronted with a ‘sharp implement’ which points into and through him, into the very core of his physical self. This part of the ritual is designed to awaken the consciousness of the candidate. It can also be compared to an ‘awakening’ of physical or spiritual energy, a frequent element in ritual religious dance. Indeed, this moment in the ritual bears striking resemblance to the concept of kundalini or shakti, the Hindu concept of a ‘releasing of spiritual energy’ housed deep within the body, often accompanied by intense physical movement expressed through dance.

Ritual and ceremony are a fundamental part of Masonry, and ironically, they are the least understood aspects of the craft from a non-Masonic perspective. This is unfortunate, for there are many parallels to ritual which exist in art. As noted by Armstrong in A Brief History of Myth, an allegorical myth which is ‘perused although it were a purely intellectual hypothesis […] becomes remote and incredible.”

Thus, a discussion with Non-masons should be a discussion of what ritual is and does. This can begin with analogies to dance and spatial symbolism.

---