

## **The reinvention of Odissi classical dance as a temple ritual.**

### **The Reinvention of Odissi Classical Dance as a Temple Ritual**

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#### **Introduction**

*“Like other forms of Indian classical dance, the Odissi style traces its origins back to antiquity. Dancers are found depicted in bas-relief in the hills of Udaygiri (near Bhubaneshwar) dating back to the 1st century BC. The Natya Shastra speaks of the dance from this region and refers to it as Odra-Magadhi”*([www.indoclassical.com](http://www.indoclassical.com), October 2003)

*“The first record of dance in Orissa is found in the manuscripts pertaining to the rituals of Lord Jagannath at his world famous temple at Puri. Dance as a ritual finds mention in Utkala Khanda of Skanda Purana, Niladri Mahodaya, Madala Panji etc. besides many other texts. There it was extensively practised by Devadasis or temple dancers (only females) as an ongoing ritual for the pleasure of the Lord. The Devadasi dance at the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri was also known as the Mahari dance. The Devadasis were called Maharis, which literally means, according to some, one who is deeply in love with the Lord. Dancing has remained a very important and indispensable item in the daily rituals (seva) of Lord Jagannath since the time of Ganga rulers of Utkal... We also find dancing as a ritual in the temple of Lord Jagannath mentioned in Agni Purana, Vishnu Purana, Srimad Bhagavatam, Padma Purana and Vamadeva Samhita”* (Rahul Acharya, Odissi dancer, [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com), October 2003)

*“Of them all, it was the temple dancers (sic) who shone brightest. The Bharatnatyam of Malaviki (sic) Sarukkai was flawless, her divine performance as intricate as lace. Dressed in orange, she brought elephants and birds to life in her hands. The Odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal, moved with easy precision, red-painted fingers and flashing eyes sculpting her stories, while the white and gold skirts of Bharati Shivaji and her disciple-daughter flowed harmoniously in the undulating circles of Mohiniattam, the most sensual of the styles. It was a graceful end to an enlightening trip. (Alice Baines, The Guardian, Review of Edinburgh Festival, 28/08/02)*

*“Odissi dance is considered one of the oldest based on archeological evidence. The present day Odissi is however a culmination of a process of reconstruction from various*

*dance traditions of Orissa like the Maharis, the Goptuas (sic) and the Bhandanrutya traditions. Maharis are equivalent to the Devadasis of the South. Goptuas (sic) are basically men who dressed themselves like female dancers and danced like the Maharis. Jayadeva's Gitagovinda has enriched the content and style of this form of dance...Odissi is not merely a dance form. It is a synthesis of beauty, grace, rhythm, melody, spirituality and devotion. It provides a feast for the eyes, music for the ears and succor for the soul. Through this dance, the danseuse pays obeisance to the Lord in all his myriad manifestations. In essence this unique dance form is a tribute to divinity." (Ramendra Kumar, The Hindu, 9/03/01)*

*Ratna's sole mission now is to reconstruct the mahari dance tradition in Orissi (in spirit, form, depiction of female characters and choreography) and both create a research institute as well as perform and promote the cause of the women's (mahari) tradition that was effectively silenced and given only a nodding acknowledgment during the years of reconstruction of the neo-classical Orissi dance, in the post-colonial nationalistic fervor of the 40's and 50's. Since then the principal gurus of Orissi dance have revived and recreated the gotipua (male) tradition of Orissi dance and brought it to international acclaim as "the" style of Orissi classical dance. (Odissi dancer and academic Dr. Ratna Roy's homepage, <http://www.olywa.net/ratna-david/ratna.htm>, October 2003)*

These are only a few examples of contemporary writing about Odissi (also known as Orissi, depending on the spelling given to the transliteration of the word from the Oriya language), a genre of Indian classical dance. The review in *The Guardian*, a known British broadsheet, well typifies the misconceptions and the aura of exoticism that surround Odissi and, more generally, Indian dance in the western world: in a breathtaking manipulation of history, contemporary performers are identified as temple dancers, the brightness of their costume and make up becoming the only feature of the dance being commented upon and images of sensuous, exotic rituals are conjured up through the use of carefully selected words such as 'divine performance', 'flashing eyes', 'white and gold skirts'.

Kumar's comments make it clear that in this construction of Odissi, archaeology has had a role to play. It has been a matter of deliberate emphasis on specific records and of narratives woven around these archaeological records and their interpretation. Odissi has been re-constructed, re-created, restored – a metaphorical ancient temple re-arranged and re-erected on new grounds - and the value of age old ritual has been ascribed to its performance, regardless of the fact that it takes place on the contemporary urban stage: its contemporary performance is perceived as a ritual re-enactment and its supposed ritual origin fills it with mystique.

Ratna Roy's mission statement is self-explanatory. Dr Roy's position is interesting, as she attempts to give a new lease of life to the mahari dance myth, creating a polarity between male dance teachers and an original group of female rightful owners of the dance.

Much has been written on ritual, ritual practices and on ritual and (theatrical) performance. Ritual has been variously defined : “ritual generally refers to human experience and perception in forms which are complicated by the imagination, making reality more complex and unnatural than more mundane instrumental spheres of human experience assume” writes Hughes-Freeland (1998:2). Already in 1993, when Richard Schechner re-wrote his essay ‘The Future of Ritual’, writings on ritual were by his admission, “voluminous” so much so that “even to say it in one word, ritual, is asking for trouble. Ritual has been so variously defined – as concept, praxis, ideology, yearning, experience, function – that it means very little because it means too much” (Schechner 1993:228). If that were the case in 1993, it is even more so now, eleven years on. Bell’s influential reframing of ritual (Bell 1992, 1997) opened the way to a rethinking of ritual as a category. Ritual and the performative seem to overlap: indeed, a number of writers no longer maintain that ritual is a performance genre, but look at performance as a series of ritual practices and ritualisation (Hughes-Freeland 1998:6).

I do not disagree that an Odissi performance, or indeed a classical ballet performance (see Wulff 1998), can be seen as a kind of ritual; ritual is moreover a particularly apt frame for viewing certain types of performance, in which ritual is referenced (Lopez y Royo 2003) and in an Odissi performance ritual is not just referenced, it is evoked. Indeed, I would suggest that in a sense an Odissi performance is a modern ritual performed on stage to celebrate a reinvented tradition and heritage – here I am mindful of what Hobsbawm wrote in 1983 about recent traditions which strive to establish continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983, 1-14).

The reinvention of Odissi as the re-enactment of an ancient temple ritual is, however, problematic and it is this construction that I intend to question. It raises several issues, which connect with one of main themes of the Cotsen symposium: the overemphasis on and the exoticisation of ritual, which in this case turns into an exoticisation and othering of Odissi dance and of its performers. It is this overemphasis on its ancient ritual value which results in a distortion of Odissi contemporary performance practice; yet this distortion also constitutes the mystique and appeal of contemporary Odissi. The overemphasis on ritual embraces the sacred, the extra-ordinary and the exotic, as the domain of ritual, seen through western eyes and turns Odissi into an alluring and mysterious art, situated in ancient Orissan temples through a myth sustained by archaeological narratives. This myth of origin is also an instrument of control and even censorship within the practice of the dance, and thus it does at times hinder the growth of Odissi as a contemporary artistic form.

### **Sixty years of Odissi**

Most current historical narratives of Odissi altogether seek to establish neat continuities, and skillfully avoid ruptures, differences and ambiguities. Their main objective is to establish the antiquity of Odissi, in an effort to give a lineage to the dance of today. They begin, quite predictably, with the Rani Gumpha caves of the pre-Christian era and their reliefs of dancing scenes; move on to the *alasa kanyas* – indolent

maidens - of the Rajarani temple in Bhubaneswar and the voluptuous Konarak stone dancers of the Sun temple (fig 1); and linger on the Jagannath temple in Puri (fig 2). The sacred *maharis* (Oriya *devadasis* or temple dancers) and their 'erotic' rituals<sup>1</sup> for the entertainment of the god enshrined in the temple, Lord Jagannath, are central to such narratives, even though the *mahari*'s actual input into Odissi dance is hard to quantify. Next in this kind of narrative come the *gotipuas*, young boys street dancers who mimicked the sacred rituals of the *maharis*, dressing up like them and performing acrobatics (fig 3).<sup>2</sup> Finally, enter the gurus, mostly former *gotipua* dancers, initially at a loose end because of the transition from colonial rule to independence and the changes in the system of patronage.

This is the point where the narrative verges on the lyrical: the gurus realized that the 'sacred art' of the *maharis* might disappear forever, unless they acted fast and together. Never mind about the *maharis* themselves – out of the temple, poverty had corrupted them and they were seen as no better than prostitutes. But their art was sublime. Thus the gurus began to work on the dance in earnest, teaching girls from respectable families – some of whom went on to become dancers of international repute. Working together with scholars, they refined and redefined their craft, found a name for it - Odissi - and turned it into one of the classical styles (or genres) of Indian dance, fighting off some initial resistance from the bharatanatyam reformers who would rather see Odissi as an offshoot of bharatanatyam<sup>3</sup>. This whole endeavour was inscribed in the artistic revival and re-construction of post independence India and its rhetoric, where each region's creative arts were being rediscovered and brought to attention, nationally and internationally.

It is a story with a happy ending, at least for some of the people involved, who acquired wealth and status in the process. There are of course variations in the narrative. Sometimes instead of beginning with Rani Gumpha, the story starts with the Indus

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<sup>1</sup> The dance of the *maharis*, interpreted in a tantric way, was symbolic of sexual intercourse: "the association between dance and sex is very strong...the dance ritual is also known to stand for the last 'm' in the five 'm' offerings of the tantric sakta ritual. This last 'm' is *maithuna*: sexual intercourse (Marglin 1985:95)

<sup>2</sup> Marglin has commented that a form of male dancing must have been performed in temples, perhaps only Siva temples, because one can see reliefs of male dancers sculpted on the Bhubaneswar Saiva temples (fig 4). However the custom of young men dancing dressed like women seems to have been introduced by the vaishnavites in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, worshipping Krishna in a *sakhi bhava* fashion- as a female friend of Radha's (*sakhi*). The *gotipuas* were young boys linked with the *akhadas* where they practiced combat and such like and on festival days in Puri they danced the Radha Krishna story dressed like *maharis* (Marglin 1985:317: Kothari 1968:32),

<sup>3</sup> It took much effort and imagination to establish Odissi as a classical dance throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, it was viewed by purists as a hybridised bharatanatyam and Rukmini Devi, the bharatanatyam reformer, founder of the famous Kalakshetra school in present day Chennai was reported to have frowned on the 'vulgarity' of the Odissi repertoire when she first saw it (Citaristi 2001:119)

Valley – and the Harappan bronze statuette of a bejewelled woman in a *proto-tribhanga*<sup>4</sup> is presented as evidence that Odissi is very ancient, pre-Vedic and wholly indigenous. Sometimes there is some confusion over the relationship between *gotipuas* and *maharis* and it is never wholly clear what exactly the dance of the *maharis* looked like, despite a number of claims (Roy, above). Sometimes the rivalries between the gurus are downplayed or highlighted, depending on the circumstances – some of them ‘made’ it, others did not, and this caused, inevitably, bitterness and jealousy and accusations of being inauthentic. And then there are the scholars: unearthing manuscripts (and occasionally attributing to them greater antiquity than warranted<sup>5</sup>), finding references to the Odissi technique in old Sanskrit manuals (with a resulting attempted brahmanisation of the dance, though never as successful as that of the Southern bharatanatyam), helping to connect temple sculptures with dance movements, in sum, following the agenda of rewriting a suitable history of the dance. Odissi is, in other words, constituted by its narrative (Joyce 2002). In this narrative, Odissi and ritual are intertwined and almost interchangeable: Odissi is seen first and foremost as a banned temple ritual and this is central to its mystique, which contributes to the way Odissi has been marketed on the urban and international performance circuit.

The history of Odissi is even more interesting than its myth. The dance was actually born in the theatres of the city of Cuttack, in Orissa, in the mid-1940s (Citaristi 2001; Pani 2000). Until then there had been no Odissi and it would take at least another 15 years before the name Odissi began to acquire some currency. A number of musicians, former street dancers and actors, began working together. These were people who had been exposed to dance from outside Orissa – such as the dance of pioneer modern dancer Uday Shankar at Almora and the resurgence of bharatanatyam in the South – and were receptive to the major changes that were sweeping across the country. Dance numbers were added, for entertainment, to the plays that were being performed in the Cuttack theatres. Among the people involved in the Cuttack theatre movement – the Jayantika group – led by Kalicharan Pattnaik were Pankaj Charan Das, Kelucharan Mahapatra and his wife Laxmipriya, Durlav Chandra Singh, Hariharan Rout and a number of others. It was in the Cuttack theatres that what later became important compositions of Odissi were actually created: among them was the *Dashavatar* (The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu), performance of which has now become *de rigueur* in most Odissi recitals – subsequently choreographed and re-choreographed by a number of dance masters (Citaristi 2001:71-73).

Kelucharan Mahapatra went on to become the most famous and the best established guru of Odissi, honoured by the Government of India, the Orissa State Government and a number of international learned bodies and organizations and acclaimed on his tours to

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<sup>4</sup> The *tribhanga* or triple bend is one of the basic postures of Odissi dance, together with the *cauka* (pronounced *choko*) or square.

<sup>5</sup> The case of the *Abhinaya Candrika*, a manuscript discovered by D.N. Pattnaik is notorious. Pattnaik fixed its date to the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Pattnaik 1958, 10) . later dating it 17<sup>th</sup> century in a new edition of the same work. More recently Das has given the date of the *Candrika* as 1750 (Das 2001, x)

Europe and the US. He has trained thousands of dancers among whom the late Sanjukta Panigrahi, acknowledged as one of the greatest Odissi exponents and dancers of our time. Kelucharan Mahapatra, best known as Kelu Babu, was of a low caste family with no music or dance background, from Raghurajpur, a village near Puri inhabited primarily by *chitrakar*s or makers of *patachitra* paintings. Kelu Babu danced as a *gotipua* when he was a boy and learnt to play the mardala drum and the tabla, which was later to be a great asset for him as a composer and choreographer of Odissi.

Another name in the above list is that of Pankaj Charan Das, another famous guru of Odissi, though never as successful as Kelu Babu, whom he initially taught (or so the story goes). Pankaj Charan Das came from a *mahari* family and it is often said that he taught the *mahari* style of Odissi. No doubt Pankaj Charan Das knew songs and tunes which traditionally belonged to the *maharis*' repertoire, but it is also true that he choreographed and re-choreographed dance pieces from scratch, emphasizing male dancing and creating several new dances for himself – he was an outstanding performer with tremendous stage presence – and for others. Some of his dazzling choreographies are also in the repertoire of dancers who never learnt from him: they are so well known that they have 'travelled'. In a sense, Pankaj Charan Das taught the 'Pankaj Charan Das' style of Odissi, just like Kelu Babu taught his own. So did Deba Prasad Das whose background was again mixed – he had been an *akhada pila*, *akhadas* being places in Puri where young men, among who *gotipuas*, trained in combat and practiced body building techniques, and played the mardala, took *bhang*, danced and sang in the evenings to entertain each other.<sup>6</sup> All these 'styles' of Odissi are very much a modern creation, a way for the gurus to differentiate from each other's work, but still in keeping with a set of rules which they established, more or less collectively, as they went along. Sometimes it is difficult to draw boundaries: some performers are happy to cross them, despite the efforts made by the Odissi dance establishment in Orissa to maintain distinctions and to create an Odissi dance canon, and more generally, 'policing' the form, making sure that the rules of a newly established classicism are not transgressed.

Even more interesting, in this respect, was the refashioning of Odissi at the hands of Guru Surendranath Jena, now in his late 70s (fig 5). Based in Delhi but from Orissa, Sura Babu recreated Odissi throughout the 1960s deriving movements entirely from the Konarak sculptures and choreographed dance pieces which made no attempt to conform with the general rules laid down by the other masters. His work was rejected by the Odissi dance establishment in Orissa but recognised by national bodies such as the

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<sup>6</sup> The *akhadas* are part of the traditional culture of Puri which revolves around the temple of Jagannath. The majority of Puri's inhabitants are *sevayats*, people who perform a *seva* (service) at the temple. According to Guru Gajendra Panda, one of the pastimes of *akhada pila* was the partaking of *bhang*, a drink made out of a concoction of cannabis and milk. *Bhang* is freely available in Puri, one of the holiest cities of India – it is said that cannabis is dear to Lord Shiva and *sadhus* (holy men) are known to be great consumers of *thandai* (drink similar to *bhang*). Puri, as a holy city, is full of itinerant *sadhus*, who have contributed to the development of a *bhang* culture, linked with the *sevayats* and the *akhadas*. (Gajendra Panda, Odissi dance guru, pers comm. August 2003)

Sangita Natak Akademi and acclaimed by Indian foremost dance scholar, Kapila Varsyayan, for the plasticity of the compositions, borne out of longstanding research in sculpture and Orissan iconography. To this day his Odissi (fig 6-8) remains controversial. On a recent trip to Orissa I was told by a known Odissi dancer from the Odissi Research Centre, in Bhubaneswar, that Sura Babu “should be jailed” for what he did to Odissi, as he has broken all the age-old rules of this tradition of dance. In saying this, she was clearly taking sides in the context of the rivalries internal to the Odissi dance world, and was doing this through invoking ‘Tradition’, presenting it to me as immutable and perennial.

The history of Odissi is inscribed in the broader project of modernization and classicization (in Euro-American terms) of Indian dance (Meduri 1996, Lopez y Royo 2003) The dance has been shaped by the different dance discourses in the subcontinent and their entanglement with political power. For example, when ‘appropriation’ was raised as an issue, in the late 1970s and 1980s, in the context of *bharatanatyam* - appropriation of the dance which rightfully belonged to the *devadasis* of the South at the hands of middle class Brahmin women, such as Rukmini Devi Arundale, the founder of the Kalakshetra school (Allen 1997) - the history of Odissi also began to be written in terms of appropriation, with dispossessed *maharis* looming large in the picture. *Maharis* were indeed dispossessed but not exactly of their dance, as there was very little left of it. Even scholars earlier actively involved in the search for a *mahari* lineage of the dance later began to invoke some caution: “the idea that Odissi evolved and was nurtured in the temple of Lord Jagannath at Puri is partially incorrect” writes Jiwan Pani, an Oriya expert of Odissi music and dance, “... what was being danced in the temples, including that of Lord Jagannath at Puri was basically ritualistic in character” (Pani 2000:147). But *maharis* have become symbols of Odissi and Odissi has been re-fashioned in their image, re-imagined as a *mahari* ritual - and this remains true regardless of all claims arising from time to time that this Odissi one sees today is entirely based on the *gotipua* imitation of the dance of the *mahari* and it is thus inauthentic.

### ***Maharis* and contemporary Odissi performance**

*Maharis* were women in the service of the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. Dedicated to the temple from a young age, they were married to the god. Their main duty was to sing and dance to the god at specific times of the day and evening. Whereas in Southern India the *devadasis* were banned from the temples in 1947, as they were perceived to be associated with prostitution, in Puri they continued until the 1960s to perform their *seva* (service) in the temple. The practice died of its own accord because of the enormous political, economic and social changes that took place and the pressure on *maharis* to discontinue their *seva*: “the view of the *devadasis* as morally degenerate women and of the royal courts and the kings as the instruments of this degeneration solved a contradiction for the nationalist elite who were concerned with the ‘revival’ of Indian arts...The attitude of revivalists in Orissa had a definite effect on the *devadasis* of Puri” (Marglin 1985:29).

Marglin’s *Wives of the God King* (1985) based on her research in Puri in the late 1970s marked an important moment in reappraising the *mahari*. Until then *maharis* had been

regarded with a sense of embarrassment by the nationalist reformers. Marglin trained in Odissi with Guru Surendranath Jena to performance standard and later went to Puri to find out more about the *maharis* and their lifestyle. Through her work, the role of the *maharis* as ritual specialists of traditional Orissa was better understood, with a new emphasis given on their sexuality and its auspiciousness, connecting *maharis* with tantric practices. Though married to Jagannath, the *maharis* were closely involved with the king, who was the earthly representative of their husband. They were associated with palace rituals, as well as temple rituals. Marglin identified the *maharis* as ‘the auspicious married women’<sup>7</sup> and views them from the perspective of the ‘values of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness’ from which “women are seen in a very different light. They are creators and the maintainers of life, the sources of prosperity, well-being and pleasure” (Marglin 1985:300). This she contrasts with the earlier “exclusive binary opposition” of purity/impurity which until then had dominated most work on Indian ritual practices.

Marglin’s study was timely and significant. This reappraisal of *maharis* was not however meant as an act of restitution of Odissi to the *maharis*. In fact what transpires from Marglin’s account is that Odissi and *mahari* did not really belong to each other. Marglin lived among *maharis*, admittedly of old age, for long periods and was told by them when in the old days, dances would be performed as part of the various rituals in the temple and at court (Marglin 1985:171-175). She also, apparently, learnt a couple of dances from one of the *maharis*. These dances are however never described in the book. What is clear, from Marglin’s writings is that *maharis* sang together with their dancing<sup>8</sup>. It seems that the dancing itself was of the *abhinaya* type – a term which can roughly be translated as performing mime - or performing *bhav* as the *maharis* would say (Marglin 1990:220), referring to an emotional and intellectual state rendered through gesture and glance.

Though Odissi was being created anew as an imagined *mahari* ritual, the *maharis* were apparently excluded from this process, though at least one or two *maharis* were active participants in the revivalist movement (Marglin 1985, 30-31). Whether this should be construed as an act of appropriation is arguable – the situation is more complex than this notion of appropriation would entail. Leaving aside the issue of the stigma attached to *maharis*, which caused a number of them to change status and sever links with Puri even before the Odissi re-construction was in full swing - the 1955 census reports only thirty *devadasis* in the Jagannath temple (Marglin 1985, 25), it is worth considering some of the practicalities involved. As Odissi was a new invention, to have old *maharis* making up the rules of what was essentially a form unknown to them could have caused problems. *Maharis* did not have a ‘dance’(as in stage dance) repertoire as such, they knew *abhinaya* songs and their *abhinaya* was in a style which did not suit the proscenium stage. *Maharis* had no theatrical experience and Odissi, the new dance, had been born out of the theatres and was meant for the stage, not for the temple; the gurus,

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<sup>7</sup> see also Kersemboom’s *Nityasumangali*, 1987 on the *devadasis* of Tiruvarur, in Tamilnadu

<sup>8</sup> Marglin gives the subdivisions among devadasis as *bhitara gauni* and *bhahara gauni* also called *nacuni* (dancers). See also Acharya 2002

including Pankaj Charan Das, were reinventing it , keeping an eye on other dance developments at a pan –Indian level.

Conversations I had last summer in Bhubaneswar with Guru Gajendra Panda (fig 9-10) and other teachers all pointed to this: the space available for dancing in the temple was only a small chamber; the *maharis* could not perform an elaborate *nrtta* within such constraints; thus it was most unlikely they would have substantial *nrtta* items in their repertoire which could be used outside the temple. The *gotipuas* and the *akhada pila* on the other hand had had a rigorous body training which could be adapted to the new dance. Citaristi has endeavoured to describe the training of the *maharis* and though her sources were Harapriya Devi and Kokila Prabha Mahari , interviewed when still alive, she also uses information taken from older textual sources, such as the *Madala Panji* – of uncertain date but perhaps earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Kulke 2001:8) and an 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscript by Lavania Mahari (Citaristi 2002:15-23). Thus it is not very clear to what period the training described refers to. In any case, the description of the training is nothing but a description of the rituals involved in establishing a relationship with the dance master<sup>9</sup> and the rules of propriety a *mahari* should follow. Description of dances in Citaristi’s essay is minimal – here is an example: “[when the midday meal started] the performance usually consisted of *nrtta* (rhythmic dance) accompanied by the sound of the *pakhawaj* (percussive instrument) without any melody or song. ...the dancer would at the beginning execute a triple turn to be able to offer a triple obeisance to both God and King. The devotees present would stand and watch from the two sides” (Citaristi 2002:17-18). This passage only tells us that the *maharis* danced to the *pakhawaj* but does not convey anything about the dance. Citaristi goes on to discuss the singing of the *maharis* and their costume and ornaments<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note here that *maharis* were also taught by male teachers – Pattnaik reports that the late Mohan Mahapatra was known as a guru of *maharis* (1971,61)

<sup>10</sup> Dancer and scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala , with whom I discussed this issue, agrees that Odissi and *mahari* dance are not the same. However, on the basis of her first hand knowledge of the dance and of Odissi dancers in the 1970s , Coorlawala believes that there definitely was a *mahari* dance and that we can see glimpses of it in ‘the style codes and movement grammars, inherited from his mother’ that Pankaj Babu taught and in the *panchakanya* series of dances that Ritha Devi, a known disciple of Pankaj Babu, used to dance and which exhibit a female quality ‘that other Odissi does not have’(Coorlawala, email exchange of 30/1/04). Nevertheless, Guru Pankaj, more than on his knowledge of the *mahari* tradition relied on his own creativity, through which that knowledge was filtered. I have never seen the *panchakanya* choreography, so I cannot comment on it, but it seems clear that it was adapted by Pankaj Babu for the stage and Devi further nuanced her interpretation of the piece. The female quality ‘that other Odissi does not have’ may well be an interpretation through a contemporary feminist sensibility rather than an inherent quality of the dance. I fully respect Coorlawala’s knowledge and scholarship, I am nevertheless wary of claims that the *mahari* dance can be retrieved and restored, to me this sounds like a rehearsal of the argument that there is an ‘ancient golden past’. I must emphasise here, as it may not be evident from the above, that

We thus have the very interesting phenomenon of a secular dance, whose sources are varied, being classicized and refashioned to reflect a re-imagined temple ritual, with the dancer taking on the persona of a temple dancer. The set repertoire of an Odissi performance is made up of dances of offering, *nrtta* pieces built around complex cross-rhythms, *abhinaya* pieces composed on the verses of the *Gita Govinda*, an erotic devotional poem about the divine lovemaking of Radha and Krishna, Oriya devotional poems and a final piece called *Mokshya* ‘liberation’, a *nrtta* which in its cadences attempts to convey the movement to soul liberation and serenity. Temple songs – the *Gita Govinda* itself was decreed as the only source for *mahari* singing at the Jagannath temple by king Prataparudradeva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – street dancing, sculpturesque poses inspired by the rich imagery of Orissan temples, folk songs and tunes, all went into today’s Odissi, as well as aesthetic developments inspired by other Indian classical dances<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless the Odissi/*mahari* equation still holds strong, despite being intrinsically contradictory.

Why Odissi should have been reinvented as a temple ritual is not a question easy to answer. It worked at the time, it gave status to the dance, it gave an element of mystique to its performance. It is also true that Odissi embodies Oriya sensibilities and reflects Oriya nationalism and Oriya identity. An interesting co-development of Odissi was the research focused on Jagannath by the Oriya School of the 1970s, with its work focused on the culture of Puri, attempting to go beyond the local to participate in a pan-Indian discourse. These newer studies on Jagannath “seem to have evolved into a full fledged project with Jagannath as a metaphor of Orissa’s multifaceted culture” (Kulke 2001:12). The Odissi dance culture, with its emphasis on Jagannath, seems to partake of this.

Odissi as the-dance-of-the-*mahari*-of-Lord-Jagannath continues to play on the ambiguity and ambivalence of a ritual and exotic spectacle, when performed out of its Oriya home. In Orissa itself there is no theatre going audience and Odissi is either performed at state functions, tagged along at the end of so-called cultural programmes – or it is performed at international festivals such as the winter one at Konarak, or it is performed at five star hotels, to an audience of non-Oriya visitors. Through being marketed as a dance modelled in the image of a temple ritual dance, Odissi is marked as a ‘Hindu’ dance and is thus inscribed in a Hinduising discourse which has been sweeping through contemporary India with renewed impetus – even if the dancer is not herself Hindu she acquires a Hindu identity, by turning into an imaginary *mahari*.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on this process which was very visible in the Indian dance of the 1970s and was later to be ruptured by the ‘contemporary dance movement’ Coorlawala writes: “Invariably in the classical dance forms the “tradition” meant Hindu rituals, mythology and culture,

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Coorlawala does not argue for any retrieval or restoration, she is in fact of the opinion that whatever *mahari* dance there was, it is now lost.

<sup>11</sup> Some Odissi gurus, as for example Mayadhar Rout, trained in Kathakali and in bharatanatyam at the famous Kalakshetra school in Madras (Chennai)

<sup>12</sup> Nowadays there are also male dancers. They do not perform dressed as women, nevertheless they do take on a feminine ‘persona’ when dancing Odissi

with occasionally token appreciation of internationally recognised artists as Allah Rakha and Akbar Ali Khan. Muslim monuments...art, manners of dress, dance and music were gradually marginalised as were other non-Hindu performers and their art. Concurrently temple rituals were transferred onto stages and platforms for tourist consumption and five-star hotels...While a third century aesthetic was being nostalgically recovered and touted as the aesthetic of the dance of India, it resulted in confused confluences of Western ideologies with indigenous values” (Coorlawala 1994:202)

In the past twenty years there has been a whole movement within Indian dance which has attempted to subvert the dominant notion of dance classicism and has tried to go beyond parameters set by traditionalists. This is not the right context to review this vibrant and very influential work. From the 1980s onwards there has been a sustained attempt, originating in the cities, at breaking regional boundaries in terms of dance forms (e.g. bharatanatyam usually seen as Southern, hence to be performed by Southerners, now performed by non-Southerners etc.) and working with the classical dance vocabulary, going beyond traditional themes, no longer upholding a notion of tradition as static and immutable.

This movement, very strong in the context of bharatanatyam and kathak, has only just begun to touch Odissi. There are now a number of dance-dramas being choreographed, an attempt to work with group dancing rather than the solo form and tentatively, some non-Oriya Odissi dancers are working creatively within the classical format, moving away from the *mahari*-inspired ‘ritualistic’ Odissi, but retaining its aesthetic conventions<sup>13</sup>. I should make it clear, at this juncture, that I am in no way condemning what has now become, in the course of six decades, ‘traditional’ Odissi. It is a breathtakingly beautiful dance form, rich and complex. I am a great admirer of the work of the Odissi gurus, who made this richness and complexity possible and on the few occasions when I had the opportunity to see both Kelu Babu and the great Sanjukta perform I was deeply touched and spellbound, to paraphrase Wulff, in an ‘Odissi revelation’ (Wulff 1998:117). But my enchantment with Odissi does not stem from a fascination for an exotic temple ritual performed by an exotic dancer (Curda 2003). What appeals to me is the perfection of its formal structure as a dance and its immense, still largely untapped creative potential, beyond the imagined ritual fiction. To a great extent, the myth of the age old temple ritual actually becomes more interesting when it is revealed to be a fiction; dancers can continue to invoke Krishna and turn themselves into heroines longing for their lord’s cooling touch and the audience can continue to revel in the melody of the Odissi tunes: the magic of the performance will not be lost if the audience knows that Odissi was never danced by *maharis* but was instead born out of the concerted effort of a group of very creative men and women.

## **Conclusion**

A theatre in New Delhi, London, New York, Singapore... To the beat of the mardala

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<sup>13</sup> Minneapolis based Odissi dancer and scholar Ananya Chatterjea should be mentioned here for her emotionally powerful work, coming out of her interrogation of Odissi classicism.

drum, the dancer, her back to the audience, enters stage left, flowers in her cupped hands, her feet tracing small arcs as she steps forward, her torso sides rhythmically moving up and down and sideways, walking languidly towards the centre of the stage. She turns around herself in the *cauka* (square) position, stops centre stage facing the audience and begins to perform her *Bhumi Pranam* (Salutation to the Earth) and *Mangalacharan*, (Invocation). On her left, at the front of the stage, there is an image of Lord Jagannath, garlanded, with cocunut and incense offerings. In the background there may be a cloth from Pipli village, famous for its appliqué work or there may be a large photograph of one of the Bhubaneshwar temples. She wears a costume which is modelled on the attire of a *mahari*, cut of a raw or white silk sari with typical Orissan patterns. She wears only silver jewellery and her make up will include heavily kohled eyes, an elaborate *tilaka* and a series of white dots all around her forehead and her eyes, down to her cheeks. She is, as far as her audience is concerned, the re-embodiment of a *mahari*; the whole performance will play on this ambivalence. The dancer from time to time will speak to her audience, moving to the side of the stage and using a microphone, explaining what she is about to do, translating Oriya and Sanskrit poetry into English, giving an indication of what the gestures mean, those same gestures she will use in the piece she is going to dance<sup>14</sup>. Throughout, Jagannath will dominate the proceedings from his seat and the smell of sandalwood joss sticks will be all pervasive. The stage has been turned into a temple; the dancer beckons her audience to follow her in her worship.

Whereas Odissi is not and never was a ritual temple dance, there is nevertheless a convergence between ritual and Odissi performance, found in the performativity of both. This however raises another order of questions, which would be more properly dealt with in a different paper: “the central issue of performativity” warns Schieffelin “whether in ritual performance, theatrical entertainment or the social articulation of ordinary human situations is the imaginative creation of a human world. The creation of human realities entails ontological issues” (Schieffelin 1998, 205).

Odissi has been and can be viewed through different frames: as a reinvented ritual temple dance, as a theatrical performance about ritual, as a layer of framed illusions, as theatre art, firmly situated in the present. Throughout this paper I have endeavoured to strip Odissi of its mystique revealing the fiction of its myth of origin, which has been sustained through manipulation of archaeological and anthropological evidence. Though it never began as a ritual, Odissi performance does however reference ritual and its theatre audience pretends to be witnessing a temple ritual: in western terms we would

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<sup>14</sup> O’Shea has recently suggested, with reference to *bharatanatyam* – thus by extension applicable to other Indian classical genres – , that this practice reflects an orientalist attitude to the dance: “This kind of pre-performance synopsis lines up two thought-systems: an English verbal framework and a South Indian choreographic one. The explanation of mudras in succession interprets the ‘Eastern’ choreography through the ‘Western’ linguistic system.”. She concedes however that “although verbal interlocution reiterates an orientalist problematic, the factors that foster the appearance of interlocution unsettle orientalist notions of a static tradition” (O’Shea 2003).

say that as the performer establishes a relationship with the audience throughout the performance, the audience ‘suspends its disbelief’ and is drawn in, participating in an illusionary ritual of spiritual worship (see Meyerhoff 1990), which will be more effective and ‘real’ depending on the skill of the performer. Here however we need to discard this entirely western frame, as it does not allow us to grasp in full the dynamics involved: “Asian performance is founded on the assumption that the world constituted in performance is not separate from the world outside performance” (Zarrilli 1990,146). What happens here is a more complex process of active performer/audience interaction which taps into a different aesthetics - known in the relevant literature as the *rasa* theory - and which is shared by Odissi and other dance and theatrical forms of India<sup>15</sup>. Zarrilli has analysed the mechanics of this process at length, suggesting that “the actor and spectator co-create the figure embodied in the actor as “other”...That dynamic figure exists between audience and actor, transcending both, pointing beyond itself” (Zarrilli 1990,144)<sup>16</sup>.

The case of Odissi is instructive. I am not interested in defining either ritual or (theatrical) performance in essentialising terms nor do I think that establishing firm boundaries between ritual and performance is truly useful (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). There are times when ritual and performance converge and conflate; there are times when they do not. This may involve exactly the same practices: it is the relationship between participant/spectator and performer/ritual specialist that seems to be crucial to this fluidity of conflation/separation and its reconfiguration. Balinese trance dancers perform to tourists in Batubulan, near the capital Denpasar, in a theatre setting, and enact a trance dance using their theatrical skills; the same performers in a different situation – an *Odalan* (temple festival) for example, an occasion where the relationship with their audience will involve a different set of loyalties and expectations – will go into a deep trance and will need the use of various paraphernalia, such as the sprinkling of holy water by a priest– to come out of the trance. One is interpreted as a theatrical performance – a ‘tourist performance’ at that<sup>17</sup>, the other as a ritual, but their outward appearance, even the dynamics are the same. Or are they? “Theories and contexts” warns Bell “affect what is seen as ritual and by whom, while those activities deemed to be ritual in turn have

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<sup>15</sup> I am aware of Ahmed’s critique of Zarrilli’s reliance on the Hindu upanishadic worldview in his articulation of what becoming the character means in Indian performing traditions and how this may not be applicable in a Buddhist context. However, for Odissi, this Hindu assumption is appropriate. Ahmed, in his rebuttal of Zarrilli’s thesis refers to *carya nritya* of Nepal, an expression of Vajrayana Buddhism, and warns us not to fall into the trap of equating Indian with Hindu (Ahmed 2003, 2)

<sup>16</sup> *Rasa* is, according to the Indian aesthetic tradition, a sentiment, distinct from emotion: the actor/dancer manipulates emotions which exist in him/herself and these turn into sentiments for the spectator (Kothari 2003,147).

<sup>17</sup> Schechner asks when a tourist show turns into ‘theatrical art’ (Schechner as quoted in Ahmed 2003,19) and Ahmed suggests that to answer the question one has “to investigate the economic pressures and cultural redundancy that many South Asian performers face in a “globalized” world threatening to erode cultural plurality” (Ahmed 2003,19)

theoretical and contextual consequences” (Bell 1997, 267). This fluidity is something that ought to be taken into greater account in interpretations, anthropological, archaeological and otherwise, of ritual and its contexts.

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