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# Modern Rendition of Ancient Arts: Negotiating Values in Traditional Odissi Dance

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## Abstract

Recent innovations in remediating performances allow dancers to perform, collaborate, teach, learn and forge new inter-body relationships that substitute the traditional Guru-Shishya or master-disciple relationship. The divide between technologized and traditional practices in dance creates a productive space that can help scholars understand how digital and networked technologies are transforming embodied cultural memory. Tradition-technology encounters and formations of a deviant discourse challenge the dominant (traditional) norms of embodied cultural memory. My qualitative study of the field reveals that innovation has been encouraged by the most members of the dance community. However, if mediated dance compromises values associated with the dance, like its sacredness, the importance of the body, and the importance of the Guru, it can be potentially subversive to the traditional practice. The main points of conflict between traditional dance and technologically mediated practices indicate moments of compromise in the traditional values.

[**Keywords:** performance, performative rhetoric, Indian classical dance tradition, technology, dance pedagogy, digital mediation, cultural memory]

## Introduction

Odissi is one of the nine recognized classical dances of India. Odissi originates from two distinctive styles of dance. One is the spiritual dance style of the female temple dancers, or Maharis. Dance, an intrinsic aspect of Indian spirituality, has shaped the social and political patterns in Indian history. The performing Modern body is often represented as fragmented, destabilized (Armstrong) and pragmatic (Bourdieu) biological entity (Merleau-Ponty). This paper examines the core value system of traditional Odissi involves sacred associations between the dance space, the dancing body and an immediate presence of the master. Digital technologies of teaching, like CDs, DVD, online videos and synchronous videos have a profound impact on these values in relation to the teaching and practice of traditional dance as well as how we understand performative cultural memory. It is understandable that new technologies have created a divide in the dance community. To some, technology is an important tool for innovation. To others, it has the potential to spoil the authenticity of the art. Odissi has been constantly remediating across several generations, and the authenticity of the dance has been constantly remediating, too. While technologizing the dance is unavoidable, to some practitioners it may be disrupting Odissi's core value system. My interviews and

surveys of practitioners of Odissi dance across the globe reveal this controversy. These findings help us understand the relationship between traditional and online teaching, and the impact of mediation on these practices.

## Background

I am an Odissi dancer with over twenty-five years of experience as a student, teacher and performer. I learnt Odissi the traditional way<sup>i</sup> since the age of four from Guru Aloka Kanungo in Calcutta. I encountered Indian classical Odissi dance at a very tender age. Indian classical dance is not only an artistic expression, but also a way of living. Odissi shaped my perception of the world and the way in which I communicate. The shaping became more evident when I joined the academic program in the United States of America, and developed a new language (rhetoric) to communicate with the academic world. I realized that my dancer-self deeply influences my pedagogic stance and attitude towards learning and research. This has also shaped the theoretical and methodological stance I have taken in this study. I will situate my focus in this juxtaposition of these personal experiences with representing my body as a dancer and as an academic. Despite my traditional learning, I have used technological tools like CDs, DVDs and online videos, in my learning, teaching and performance over the past decade.



Figure 1: Temple sculpture & Odissi dance  
(photo courtesy: Neha Kachroo, Pramod Thupaki)

Having learned the dance in a traditional, unmediated environment and having taught the dance using tools of technology, my unique position allows me to raise crucial questions regarding the performance of cultural memory through several forms of remediation. In this chapter, I will attempt to explore how digital dance practice is changing the pattern of traditional pedagogies and practices of dance. Coming from an ethnic heritage that values story, orality has played an important part of the trans-generational passage of wisdom. Mediation of the memory of Odissi dance happens through this transmission of knowledge by practitioners of Odissi (choreographers, learners, teachers, musical accompanists and performers). I have bolstered my own experiences as an Odissi student/teacher/performer by extensive reading in the field, field observations, interviews, surveys and interactions with veteran Gurus (masters), as well as contemporary proponents and users of digital technologies. These practitioners of

Odissi dance are instrumental in construction and mediation of the values of this art.

In all its years of arduous training of the dance, the focuses lie on the precision and dexterous execution of hand and body movements. In this dance, the presence of the body and the sacredness associated with the Guru are central to performance and learning. Odissi has survived for generations through the *Guru-Shishya parampara* or master-student tradition. When bodies are mediated from its traditional dance space, to an online space where they can be digitally represented, the body as an “avatar” or a digital image on Skype or a video forges new relationships between this sacred art and its pedagogy, and its performance.

The dance originated in the temples of Orissa as an ancient performance tradition. In the act of etching the movements into stone sculptures, the memory transmits itself from the physical body (the original keeper of memory of this oral artistic tradition) to the sculptures that represent the body. These sculptures were instrumental in the survival of the art form for several centuries. When sculptors sculpted the movement of the temple dancers on the temple walls, the memory of this artistic ritual got detached from the body of the temple dancers and mediated to other means that preserve/perform the memory. These bearers of memory also served as supplementary tools for teaching. Temple sculptures have a deep influence in helping dance practitioners understand and teach postures of the dance.

Later, in the twentieth century, we started etching them in virtual spaces. This was done through the creation of virtual dancing bodies on videos, web spaces, and virtual worlds like Second Life. With new digital technologies, it is possible to record, replay, edit, and remix performances; virtual worlds allow dancers to turn into avatars and transform their physical shapes and perform gravity defying feats otherwise impossible in physical spaces. The influence of these new digitally mediated practices on teaching, on performance of traditional dance, and on how we understand performative cultural memory has generated interesting debates within the community of artists, and raises provocative questions about the transformative impact of remediation of the dance by the current sprout of tech-savvy students and performers on the conventional practice in the new



Figure 2: Odissi dancer in Second Life (Shree Frizzle is an avatar of the current author)

environment. My research in of the field has revealed that new technologies have created a divide in the dance community. Some senior gurus and some traditional practitioners of the art find that the new technologies have the potential to hurt both the transmission and performance of traditional dance. Most of the dancers of the new generation embraces the remediation of the dance with new technologies, and sees it as an important way to preserve, promote, and secure the survival of the art form. The reception of technological remediation of the performative practice is mixed and a rich source of understanding of the transformative nature of art through technology. Before I explore and analyze parts of my conversations with Odissi practitioners across the globe, I would like to present my understanding of remediation as I have chosen to use in this chapter. I would also like to explore the significance and function of the concept of “tradition” and “authentic” as understood by the practitioners of this dance.

### **Tradition and Remediation**

Remediation has modified the dance at every stage, problematizing the concept of “authentic” and “traditional”. Bolter and Grusin explain that "The very act of remediation [. . .] ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged and unacknowledged ways" (47). In the remediated form of dance, visual and aural semiotic artifacts that perform the function of maintaining the memory of the dance replace the presence of the body. The foundational aspects of this cultural performative memory remain in the remediations, theoretically at least. For those practicing traditional dance, however, the evolutionary path these remediations have taken over the centuries— from oral transmission, to being templated in stone sculptures, to videos, to digital avatars— has distanced the necessary body and pedagogical relationships in negative ways. These are the values underlying the performance. This paper is also works as a mediation project between the traditional Odissi masters and dance practitioners who use digital technologies for teaching, performance and stage enhancement.

The habitus of the Odissi dance performer determines dispositions of the dancer and the traditional value system conveyed in each gesture, pose, and performance. For Bourdieu, the habitus flexibly determines the subject’s worldview. To Bourdieu, “Habitus is the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in the order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g. of language economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions” (85). Practitioners of Odissi dance constructed traditional values associated with this art to give the dance a regional and national identity. The collective memories attempt to reproduce and continue traditional practices “more or less” completely, thereby allowing scope for flexibility, subjective interpretation and innovation. Bourdieu defines class habitus as “a subjective but not individual system of

internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (86). The system is subjective and therefore interpretive, while recognizing that the subjective always works from the “internalized structures” of understandings and frameworks governing perception. Generated not by an individual, but a group, the habitus shapes the patterns of an understanding that are common to the members of that group. This system influences how the subject interprets the systems around him/her.

Most Odissi dancers inhabit/perform tradition by adhering to socially patterned structures that innately cultural systems flexibly structure. The practitioner of this dance is automatically a part of this value system. To me, understanding this system from the perspective of the survey responders and interviewees was important for my research’s underlying theory. These stories are important because they come from “a conscious, intentional and rational” (36) participants who are retrospectively rationalizing their practices. Since experiences are heterogeneous, the individual dancers display differently nuanced attitudes towards remediation of the dance according to the value system that the habitus inculcates. To Bourdieu, “each individual system of dispositions may be seen as a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus, expressing difference between trajectories and positions inside and outside of class” (86). The individual artistic practices constructed from the habitus, and these constructions determine the value system that underlies the artistic practices of the dancers.

With a notion of the habitus, it is possible to understand ‘tradition’ in several ways. In terms of Odissi dance, tradition involves practices that were apparently part of the temple rituals. These orally transmitted practices are spiritual in nature, adding to the underlying value system based on this dance. The practice of Odissi dance and its social manifestations are rooted in the process of learning and performing, more *traditions*. Importantly, though, in the case of Odissi dance, traditions transmitted across generations are not hegemonic articulations of a community or a set of coercive regulations on how to practice the art. Performers can and do creatively adapt these dance practices through their interpretations and remediations of them. The tension emerges when classical traditions and cultural memories, which are the creations of the collective unconscious across generations, are remediated, especially in spaces that distance the performer from body and the guru-shishya relationship. Practitioners can become uncomfortable and wary of these potentially counter-hegemonic attempts by the mediated dance practices. The traditional artistic practices of eastern cultures are strongly rooted in the hierarchical pattern of the master-disciple relationship. The present generation of dancers attempts to maintain the purity of the dance as they pass down the memory of the dance to Indian and non-Indian students. While, most practitioners support innovations, if any form of innovation can potentially hurt the dance’s perceived authenticity, it is discouraged.

Due to globalization, the practices of traditional arts are no longer limited to the national or cultural borders. Often in the remediation in the practices of these arts, the borders of the virtual and the real are smudging. Based on the attitudes of the practitioners as revealed in my research, I assert that diasporic and non-Indian populations practicing art have demonstrated awareness and value for traditional values surrounding this performative practice. Alessandra Lopez y Royo and Avanthi Meduri have worked on authenticity and tradition in context of the diasporic practices of the art. Both acknowledge the cultural specificity of the practice of Indian classical dance tradition and argue the necessity of understanding the dances not in terms of western theoretical assumptions. Finnegan defines tradition as “any established way of doing things whether or not any antiquity; the process of handing down practices, ideas or values” (7). To her, traditions are “ideas of a) unwritten or oral transmission (but what exactly *this* implies is, likewise, not always agreed upon); b) something handed down and *old* (but how old and in what sense varies); and c) *valued*—or occasionally disvalued—beliefs and practices (but whose values count and why seems to vary)” (1991, 106). As she defines the idea of traditional practices, Finnegan includes the scope and limit of this definition. The limitations of this definition allow flexibility of interpretation and practice within the restrictions and constraints of tradition. Dancers sometimes consider memories transmitted orally as “old,” “original,” and therefore valued by many who are involved in the practice of this art. According to Finnegan, tradition brings with it the concept of “our” and “us”. According to her, Western researchers never fully understand what traditions mean. They outline inaccurate “(n)otions about the nature and applicability of tradition” (110) to define and identify eastern cultures. Western imperial powers thus facilitated projects to use these “our” and “us” concepts of tradition for anthropological categorization within colonized countries. Their association of traditional is to the “primitive”(106) and “old” (110). In general, practitioners of Indian classical dances take “traditional” as “pure”, “authentic” and “original” (their terms). In order to understand how the value system shapes and stabilizes the practice, I will present the voices from the field.

### **Values: Body and Guru and the Sacred Space**

Most people in the artistic community consider the sacredness of the dance as valuable to its practice. When I was learning dance, my Guru asked me to associate the dance with a form of worship. In this sub-section, I will summarize the results from my interviews with Gurus conducted in Orissa and the responses to my survey administered online. Respondents acknowledge their awareness of the sacredness of this dance as an essential value in several ways. To many dancers, purity lies in the authenticity of the dance. The artist community conceptualized authenticity over several generations. Though the definition of authenticity has evolved across generation in this practice, the association with spirituality is has remained in this temple dance tradition.

In relating the story of the origin of the dance to me, Guru Gangadhar Pradhan, an eminent Odissi Guru, reiterated the spiritual aspects of the dance sculpted on the walls of the temples of Orissa. Pradhan said, “Gurus saw the sculptures on the temple walls, researched on them and perfected the poses. The best dance poses are on the walls of Konarak, Rajarani, Mukteshwar, Lingaraj. These also show that dance was happening in those temples.” The importance that he placed on the questions about the Guru and the purity of classical dance leads one to associate sacredness with this idea of the dance. I understood from the conversation with him that he associated sacredness with the art. For instance, traditionally, the presence of the musical instruments was vital and sacred and the dancer would begin the performance with acknowledgement of the instruments by offering obeisance to them. Now that dancers mostly use pre-recorded music in performance, the tradition of touching the instrument and then touching one’s forehead in an act of offering respect has discontinued. There was a sense of urgency when Pradhan mentioned, “Gurus, artists, need to be ‘awake’ ... they need to transmit the tradition to one generation to the next and to the next. They need to advise, teach to remember what is traditional.” He went on to express disapproval for dancers who are “slipping” from the classical tradition by attempting to change the dance style. To him, if a dancer changes the form, context and costume of Odissi and if they do not perform according to the grammar of classical Odissi dance, they should not call it “Odissi”. They should simply call it “Creative Dance.” To him, the dance of a classical Odissi artiste needs to align with the approved performative grammar that the community recognizes.

To veteran Bandha guru Maguni Das, “Music in Sanskrit is “Sangeet”... “Sang” means union. Sangeet is the union between the body of the dancer and the music accompanying the dance. It is important for the people to get together and perform.” He stresses the importance of the physical presence of the Guru, the musician and the musicians playing on the mardala (drums), veena (string instrument), flute and violin. To him, this communion creates an ambience of sacredness and purity.

The body of a dancer is the mediator of meaning. Each gesture and movement conveys a specific message. When the dance video or Skype transmits dance, the meaning of the body undergoes remediation in the online or digital space further. The meaning disassociates from the audience in this remediation. The survey question related to teaching with technological tools like DVDs and videos generated comments from the learners and teachers of Odissi related to the collaborations conducted virtually (through chat or Skype). Email correspondences further clarified the concerns about body expressed by the practitioners. Technological tools like video and Skype is however, quite extensively used in teaching, learning and performing, especially by diasporic and non-Indian practitioners.

Eminent Odissi master, Ratikanta Mohapatra is resistant to the over-dependence of technology in the performance and pedagogy of dance. To him, the



presence of technology discredits the meaning-making potentials of the body. “There are several effects that the body can show; we do not need technology so much.” He meant that Indian classical dance contains a gamut of postures, gestures and expressions to represent a visual on stage. If there is a storm scene, it is possible to portray that through the movements of the body and music. Stage effects can also enhance the effects, but it takes away from the possibility of recreating the same through movement alone. Mohapatra challenges dancers to explore the full potential of the body and not to replace the body’s ability mediate the meanings on stage with “special effects” made possible through stage technologies.

An Odissi dancer from the Middle East wrote in a survey response, “The technology is used in several ways: 1) remembering the poses and sequence, 2) criticizing later and improving the movement.”. Technologies of dance are serving as a memory keeper and as a pedagogical tool for this dancer. A video played repeatedly ingrains the steps in the memory of the dancer. Since the learner is able to watch her/his performance through videos, they get the scope to locate and improve imperfections in their rendition. Here, the survey respondent seems to project more extensive use of technological tools for teaching of the dance in future.

The figure of the Guru or master has been traditionally significant in Indian arts. The survey asked if dance-learning technologies such as DVDs and videos comprise the position of the Guru. They responded variously. None of the respondents undermined the importance of the Guru under any circumstance. Learning the basic nuances of this dance through personal interactions with an expert is not only crucial for learning the right way to perform, but also for gaining the knowledge of the underlying values of the art. “You can learn recipes from the Internet, not dance”, said Ratikanta Mohapatra. His response was almost sarcastic. In his response, he tried to highlight the exclusiveness of this dance and the value of the process of transmission of the knowledge of this dance.

Legendary Odissi Guru, Gangadhar Pradhan said technologizing is unavoidable, but dancers should use technology “in the right way.” The inner values of the dance should be unspoiled when dancers use technologies in dance. He acknowledged the requirement and unavoidability of digital practices. To Pradhan, books on dance show postures or describe the postures. He said, “Working with the Guru is required to understand the nuances of the dance. The teacher communicating and illustrating these layers of meaning is important in the learning of this piece of dance. If a video replaces the Guru’s body, it must show the dance clearly and explain the meaning of each nuance clearly. Pradhan emphasized that a Guru needs to demonstrate what is *chowka*, *tribhanga arasa*, *mandala*<sup>ii</sup>. Then you can have the idea and you can emulate that correctly.

New York-based dance scholar Uttara Coorlawala explained her experience with dance videos with these words: “it subtracts the presence of the whole body

and adds to the presence of close up faces... It gets both revelatory and tricky...” Learning dance with technology presents an interesting juxtaposition of opposites: Learning videos replace or conceal the Guru. The Guru is, however, present in the form of a remediated image in the video. The close-ups of the face can reveal the expressions during the dance. The close ups of the hand gestures and feet can also give an understanding of the grammatical aspects of the dance, helping students to hone their own dance postures. She went on to say that the practice of performing with technological tools is still developing and the effects not known yet.

That traditional dance has been rooted to the immediate presence of the guru. To Coorlawala, “Technology can be helpful in documentation, propagation, teaching, learning and choreography. It is just an aid for dancers and dance teachers. The Guru (must) maintain the pristine form in practice and performance of the dance style.” Coorlawala reflects the viewpoint of most dancers I corresponded, that technology has a very important role in dance practice. Technology can be a supplement for teaching and for promotion, networking and memorizing. However, the Guru requires being present in order to help the student perform the dance and embody the memory of the dance with geometrically perfect postures and gestures. The feedback is crucial.

An Indian dancer based abroad also agrees that there is no substitute of Guru's personal presence in learning. She pointed out, “There are many places in the world where my dance form (i.e. Odissi) doesn't have good teachers/performers... My stay abroad has convinced me that there are many students who are not able to learn the dance form just because they do not have a teacher in their city /town. .” Being in the presence of the Guru can be rare and expensive in case of non-Indian dancers. Indian classical dance teachers are less in number outside India, so a student might need to travel for a long distance to learn from the Guru.

Most Odissi dancers agree that videos cannot completely replace the body in a pedagogical and performative space, although videos can be useful in preserving the memory of the dance while the student is learning. Most practitioners approve of making these tools supplementary to teaching or performance for enhancement and not as a replacement of the body of the dancer or the Guru.

In addition to the sacredness of the body and the guru as core values of Odissi dance represented in my data, several respondents discussed the ways in which the sacredness of space remains central to Odissi dance. Some practitioners see the Internet as a liberatory space, which is not necessarily in coordination with the nature of this dance that has traditionally needed protection by the community against any kind of colonization. To them, the Internet gives power, knowledge and visibility, which might not necessarily be a good thing since it creates tension amongst the artists who seek to persevere in traditional ways. One survey respondent writes, “When one learns just the art from videos without

complete understanding of the cultural context, the art is only half-learned. They often might do something or perform somewhere, which might be an insult to the art form. Performing an art form in dinner party is not proper. Classical dance is a very formal thing, it is important for students to understand that. For this, the Guru needs to help students understand the importance of tradition that determines what is proper and what is not.” The responder refers to the improper ways in which the artiste can performed Odissi. For instance, it might be improper to perform Odissi in a party where non-vegetarian food and alcohol is present. It requires a cultural understanding of dance in order to make these decisions. There is no written law regarding the “proper” and improper places for a performance of Odissi. That might be a reason for the respondent’s recommendation that the Guru must help students understand these culture specific concepts.

### **Analysis of Patterns Identifiable in the Conversations**

The analyses of several quotes from the interviews and surveys present views of practitioners of Odissi dance on the sacredness of the body, the guru, and the space in which the dancer performs are central to maintaining the tradition of Odissi. The comments by the practitioners show that most of them value the sacredness of the dance, presence of the body and importance of Guru. Some responders also presented a view that the space in which the dancer performs the dance is also sacred. These values manifested when respondents discussed the impact of remediating technologies on the learning and performance of dance. Remediating technologies have strongly influenced Odissi over the recent past, and the effects are still visible. All survey respondents use technology in some way or form, but still maintain some connections to the traditional aspects of the performance. Many respondents demonstrated knowledge of the affordances of particular technologies over others. In these moments, the traditional values surface. However, to what extent might these remediations of Odissi affect the dance’s perceived authenticity? The respondents expressed a variety of viewpoints on this topic.

For respondents, the most important of these values is the immediate physical presence of the Guru. Most of the values described above are present in the pedagogy of real space involving the Guru and the Shishya. Remediations of the dance might compromise these values. Taken together, then, the interpretation of the value system described at the beginning of this chapter reverberates in most of the responses received in my interactions within the dance community. Studying tradition in this way confirms some of the core values of the dance that I learnt as a student. My data also revealed several perspectives on tradition, the body of the dancer, and the importance of the Guru from several people involved in this artistic practice. Though values of the Odissi dance community have evolved across generation, it is important to be aware and respectful of certain primary values of this dance that define its nature.

Mediation through technology is not a smooth system. In “From Pencils to Pixels: The Stages of Literacy Technology”, Dennis Baron examines the stages of mediation in the advancement of technologies of communication and literacy. He argues that in spite of the initial resistance against the technologies, they ultimately integrate in a culture as if it were always a part of it. “As the old technologies become automatic and invisible, we find ourselves more concerned with fighting or embracing what’s new. Ten years ago math teachers worried that if students were allowed to use calculators, they wouldn’t learn their arithmetic tables. Regardless of the value parents and teachers still place on knowing math facts, calculators are now indispensable in math class”(31). Mediating the traditional art of Odissi through technological tools might not necessarily be harmful. However, it is important to understand the effect of this on the dance, to preserve the authenticity of ancient art. Authenticity of this spiritual art is valued amongst the Odissi practitioners. The patterns of conversations above show that to some Gurus, sacredness of the dance is intrinsic. Students practicing Odissi dance need to understand this aspect of the practice. To some Gurus, it is important to help students across cultures recognize these values.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the traditional value system has been helpful in unraveling the profound significances of some of the nodes of tension and the drama surrounding them. Though these patterns of valuation of the body of the dance, the role of guru, and the context for performance are key aspects of this tradition, it would be mistaken to assume that these patterns are tidy representations of this cultural practice. In fact, these perspectives often contradict each other, instigating conversations in the field of Odissi dance practitioners and the formation of an alternative value system that may not be in agreement with the core value system of this dance.

Classical Indian dance has moved from one phase of mediation to another and one context to another, from folk to classical and then to digital. Indian Dance has journeyed from immediacy to codification to the floating signifiers of digital media that deviate from the ritualized, codified two-thousand-year-old cultural practice. Mediation of the dance in online spaces and in teaching videos has led to destabilization, confusion and some resistance from the veteran practitioners of the art, who welcome changes, but think that the central authoritative figure of the Guru is essential for the ultimate survival of this cultural art form, for its continued performance and preservation (Cushman, Ghosh). Mediations of the dance in digital spaces, such as in virtual spaces and social networking spaces and its mediation in different modes, such as in teaching videos, take away the traditional association of the dance with the body of the dancer, importance of the teacher and sacredness. The objections of the Odissi Gurus to remediations of the dance are not coercive, as long as mediation of the dance does not spoil the

underlying values of the dance. This ancient dance has mediated several times. The memory has transferred from one mode to another and to another. The values of underlying the dance practice and pedagogy has remained essential of the dance.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> My Guru would sit in front of the class and chant the *bols*. She would demonstrate one piece a number of times and ask us to repeat the same. Guru teaches a small piece in every session, and we would repeat the piece closely several times to memorize it.

<sup>ii</sup> the postures of Odissi and the individual dance pieces of the dance that comprises the entire section

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