‘A time to dance’: Cultural conceptions of dance in Biblical Hebrew

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The conceptual relatedness of motion and emotion is cross linguistically indicated in metaphors of emotions, where the source domains are different forms of motion. Examples, from Zlatev, Blomberg, and Magnusson (2012), are presented in (1)-(4).

(1) English: ‘My heart fluttered.’ (Zlatev et al., 2012, p. 437)
(2) Swedish: ‘He was cast into deep depression.’ (Zlatev et al., 2012, p. 439)
(3) Bulgarian: ‘He stirs me on.’ (‘He drives me crazy’) (Zlatev et al., 2012, p. 440)
(4) Thai: ‘heart dance’ (‘feel surprised’) (Zlatev et al., 2012, p. 443)

In her study on the semantic evolution of the French émouvoir ‘move’, ‘disturb’, ‘affect’ (i.e. emotional change) and mouvoir ‘move’, Bloem (2012) found that the two are etymologically related, and shows how the meaning of the first has underwent a process of psychologisation from physical to emotive movement. This process, she argues, reflects the dominant Cartesian conception of body-mind distinction from the 17th century. Before the Descartes era, such a clear distinction was not common in European languages, as Geeraerts and Grondelaers (1995) show in their study on emotive metaphors in English, French, and Dutch. The studies

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mentioned above are examples of the clear association between motion and emotion as reflected in (figurative) language use in a number of languages. Not less important, they emphasise the role of culture in the motion-emotion association.

An interesting case of expressive or emotive motion is the concept of DANCE. In many cultures dance is a physical means of communication or a physical expression of emotion, linguistically expressed by a motion verb. According to Youngerman’s (1975) anthropological perspective, dance is “…a physical phenomenon and a cultural product, … A dance is an event – a behavioural process which takes place in particular context. . . exists as a body of concepts and feelings…” (Youngerman, 1975, p. 117, italics in the source). Following this general definition, the present contribution is a modest, non-exhaustive, study of the cultural conceptualisation of ‘dance’ in Biblical Hebrew (BH), a written form of Ancient Hebrew from the first millennium BCE. The distribution of different dance-terms and different linguistic forms over contexts forms the basis for a preliminary general cognitive-cultural profile of this concept in BH.

1 Distribution of ‘dance’ in BH

The concept of DANCE occurs 28 times in BH and is expressed by four different stems (see Table 1).¹ The most frequent of the four, with 16 occurrences, is the stem xul, which conveys the meaning of ‘dance’ in contexts of celebrations or rituals. According to Kaddari (2007), the meaning of the stem in the related Arabic is ‘spin in circle’, and in a southern variant of that language the stem means ‘a round/circular place’. The aspect of circle appears also in Even Shoshan (1992) and Brown, Driver, and Briggs (1906). In most of its occurrences the stem xul is a noun, and it also the only stem, which expresses ‘dance’ with a noun.

¹The four dance-stems discussed here are the most frequently associated with dance as expressive motion. Other (related) verbs of specific motion types are not included in this study (see Gruber, 1981 and Wright, 2002, for discussions on other verbs which may be interpreted as dance in BH).
**Table 1:** Social-cultural identity of dancers, context and characteristics, ordered by stem and frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Identity dancer</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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</table>
| xul  | (young) Women (7) | 1. Celebration of successful exodus of the people out of Egypt  
2. Yearly festival of God  
3. Welcome warriors returning from the battle  
4. Celebration in general | Habitual expression of joy/praise for God, kings or warriors, performed in group, volitional, emotive |
|      | People in general (6) | 1. Celebration for God  
2. Celebration for the city of Zion | Habitual expression of joy/praise of God, or cities, performed in group, volitional, emotive |
|      | No dancer (2) | Dance as opposite to mourn | Habitual expression of joy, volitional, emotive |
|      | Daughter of judge (1) | Welcome of father returning from the battle | Habitual expression of joy |
| rkd  | Mountains and hills (3) | 1. Caused by the voice of God  
2. Caused by witnessing the exodus of the people out of Egypt. | Metaphorical, non-volitional, (emotive) |
|      | Chariot(s) (2) | Carried by horses to the battle | Metaphorical, non-volitional, non-emotive |

*(continued on next page)*
Table 1: (continued)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Identity dancer</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rkd</td>
<td>Satyrs - animals with demonic features/ goats, inhabiting desolate ruins (1)</td>
<td>In desolated Babylon, after God's punishment, where only wild animals but no human will dwell.</td>
<td>Habitual motion of goats, volitional, non-emotive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children (1)</td>
<td>Unrelated to event/circumstance</td>
<td>Habitual physical, play-like activity, volitional, emotive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No dancer (1)</td>
<td>Dance as opposite to mourn</td>
<td>Habitual expression of joy, volitional, emotive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>King (1)</td>
<td>Dancing before the ark of God</td>
<td>Expression of joy/praise of God, volitional, emotive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xrr/pzz</td>
<td>King (3)</td>
<td>Dancing before the ark of God</td>
<td>Expression of joy/praise of God, volitional, emotive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second most frequent stem, occurs nine times, is rkd, of which the literal meaning is something like '(merrily) leap/skip/jump'. Kaddari (2007) points at the related Acadian, Syrian, and Arabic, where the meaning of rkd is ‘fast skip’. The two other stems are xrr lit. ‘whirl’, ‘spin’, and pzz lit. ‘jump’, ‘agile’, ‘leap’. The meaning of xrr in Syrian is ‘dance’, ‘be light’, ‘move fast’, and in Arabic ‘emotionally upset’ (see Kaddari, 2007).

As motion, DANCE in BH is thus associated with circle, spin, whirl, light, fast movement, skip, leap, and jump. These forms of motion receive specific (emotive) meanings in different contexts, where the social-cultural identity of those who dance (henceforth dancers) and the circumstances play an important role. As Table 1 shows, there are differences between the stems in the type and identity of dancers, as well as the circumstances of dance. These differences are further discussed within two general perspectives, a cognitive and a cultural.
2 Some cognitive aspects of dance

There are three general types of ‘dancers’ in BH, namely human, animate, and inanimate. Dance of inanimate entities is metaphorical, compared to animals’ motion, i.e. leap or skip movement of goats, rams, lambs, calves, or a young ox. The stems \textit{xul}, \textit{xrr}, and \textit{pzz}, refer only to human dancers and \textit{rkd} is used for all three types of dancers. However, \textit{xul} seems to be the prototypical stem of human dance, and \textit{rkd} is more associated with animate and metaphorical inanimate dancers.

The three types of dancers differ also in volition. Whereas ‘dance’ of humans and animate seems to be volitional, that of inanimate entities is always caused by external force and not necessarily volitional. In (5), ‘a dancing chariot’ refers to the rapid leap-like movement of chariots carried by galloping horses. In this occurrence, dance is clearly non-volitional.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(5)] The sound of a whip, the sound of a rattling wheel, and a galloping horse and a dancing chariot. \hspace{1cm} (Nah 3:2)
\end{itemize}

In (6), the dance of mountains and hills is caused by witnessing the exodus of the people out of Egypt, a spectacular event directed by God. Dancing in this case might be volitional, but it is clearly caused by a reaction of fear, surprise, or amazement in the spectators.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(6)] The mountains danced like rams, the hills like lambs. \hspace{1cm} (Psa 114:4)
\end{itemize}

In (7) non-volition is clear where dance of mountains is explicitly caused by the voice of God. In this case metaphors operate at two levels. The first is the level of the cause, i.e. the voice of God as an active, volitional forceful agent who physically causes mountains to dance. The second is the level of the effect, i.e. mountains as a physically caused-to-dance patients.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(7)] He made Lebanon dance like a calf and Sirion like a young wild ox. \hspace{1cm} (Psa 29:6)
\end{itemize}

A related aspect to volition is emotiveness. Human dance is clearly characterised by expression of positive emotions such as joy or gratitude.
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Table 2: Characteristics of dance-stems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Animacy</th>
<th>Volitional</th>
<th>Emotive</th>
<th>Connotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xul</td>
<td>human</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rkd</td>
<td>human</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>animate</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>inanimate</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xrr</td>
<td>human</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pzz</td>
<td>human</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Animate dance seems to be non-emotive, and inanimate dance is not explicitly emotive, but both (6) and (7) imply the emergence of dance as a result of emotions. As the Thai example in (4) shows, the relation between dance and emotive reaction is not exclusive to BH. In Thai it is the human heart that ‘dances’ out of surprise. Emotiveness of dance leads us to the aspect of connotation. Whereas human dance is in general positively connotated, i.e. associated with joy and gratitude, inanimate dance is neutrally or negatively connotated, i.e. associated with amazement, surprise, or fear.

To summarise, the distribution of dance-stems in BH involves the following cognitive factors: animacy, volition, emotiveness, and connotation (see Table 2). Whereas human dance is prototypically associated with volition, emotiveness and positive connotation, dance of animals, although volitional, is non-emotive and neutrally connotaed. Dance of inanimate entities is mostly non-volitional, may be emotive, and negatively or neutrally connotated. Metaphorically used, the source of inanimate dance is animals’ dance-like motion. The majority of human dance-stems, and in particular of xul, indicates the general relation of DANCE to emotion and expressivity. In the following section some cultural aspects of these characteristics are discussed.
3 Some cultural aspects of dance

Also when performed by individuals, dance in BH seems like a social activity with cultural functions. The most frequent type, expressed by *xul*, is assumed to be usually a group dance in circle, associated mainly with women, and performed at feasts. As was mentioned above, *xul* usually occurs in the noun form, namely *maxol* or *mexolot* ‘dance’ or ‘dances’, and the dancers are described by verbs such as ‘sing’, as in (8).

(8) Is this not David, to whom they sang with dance? (1Sam 29:5)

The verb ‘sing’ in (8) has a masculine plural form, which is often generic in meaning, and thus refers to both genders. This may be the case here as well, but the question in (8) refers to an earlier event in which women’s dance was reported. Other occurrences of *xul* as noun with the generic masculine-plural form very likely refer to female dancers as well. The distribution of *xul* shows that women, mostly girls and young women, are the prototypical dancers in feasts or rituals, either as individuals or in a group.

This may partially explain a despise the female viewer in (9) experienced when she saw a man dancing. The dancer is King David who seems ridiculous in the eyes of Michal, the daughter of Saul, who loved David.

(9) As the ark of the covenant of Yhwh came to the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing; and she despised him in her heart.

(1Chr 15:29)

The text in (9) implies an (spontaneous) individual dance of King David, expressed by the stem *rkd*, but it is not unlikely that group-dance, performed by women, was part of the same event. The despise toward the behaviour of David in this context may not only be caused by his gender, i.e. atypical dancer, but also by his status as king who is not expected to perform in such a way in public. Either way, dance in social-cultural events seems to have fixed rules in regard to the status and identity of dancers (for a full interpretation of this context see Wright, 2002).
Rather than gender and individual-group activity, human dance in BH is strongly related to the worship of God. Dance is a way to express joy, gratitude and praise to God, either in organised feasts or as an individual, spontaneous way, as in (9). As Wright (2002) suggests, dance in the context of God was a means of attracting his attention, or in his words: “The music provides the aural element, which attracts the god's attention. The dancing provides the complementary visible dramatic action” (Wright, 2002, p. 223). As was discussed above, the relation to God also occurs in the metaphorical inanimate dance, where instead of joy and gratitude, dance is a result of fear, amazement, or surprise. In addition to the divine context, human dance expresses joy and gratitude toward men of high status such as king or chief, and it is a common way of welcoming warriors returning from the battle, either by a group or by individuals. Common to the different events is the accompanying tambourine, implying the use of rhythm as the basis of dance in public events. It is not clear from the texts whether the dancers were those who simultaneously carried and played the tambourines, or there were other people whose role was to provide the rhythm for the dancers.

A different form of dance is the habitual merry play-like activity of children, expressed with the stem *rkd*, as in (10).

(10) They send out their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. (Job 21:11)

The speaker, Job, refers to the carefree life of the evil, whose children are free and happy, emphasising the unjust according to which evil people manage to avoid punishment for their deeds. Dance in this context conveys normality and welfare of children's life, regardless of specific event or ritual, and implies cheerfulness.

Finally, the maxim *et rekod* ‘time to dance’, implying the prominent status of dance in life, is of special importance and relevance to the cultural conceptualisation of dance in BH. The maxim is part of a chapter in the book of Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom texts, where ‘dance’ stands in contrast to mourn, as (11) shows.

(11) A time to mourn and a time to dance. (Eccl, 3:4)
This structure, i.e. pairs of contrasting concepts in adverbial phrases, forms about a third of the chapter, which opens with the quote in (12).

(12) For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.  

(Dccl 3:1)


The text implies the complexity of life, the constant presence of positive as well as negative aspects and events, which contrast each other and thereby complement each other. Life without dance is not harmonious, in the same way that life without mourning is not harmonious, and also not without all other positive and negative concepts. The performing of dance at the return of warriors from the battle clearly illustrates this dichotomy. Battles always involve killing and hence inevitable mourning, but celebrating the return of those who survive the battle is as necessary and important.

4 Summary

The distribution of dance terms, in different linguistic forms, was examined within two general perspectives, cognitive and cultural, and resulted in some preliminary findings. In the first, differences in volition, emotiveness and connotation were considered in relation to the types of dancers, i.e. human animate, and inanimate. As the most frequent type, human dance was also found to be the most associated with volition and emotiveness, and it is positively connotated. Human dance is also at the centre of the cultural perspective, where it is strongly related to joy, praise of, and gratitude to God. In addition, dance-events are common in contexts of warriors returning from the battle. Dance is often an organised group activity, in which women are the prototypical dancers, often accompanied
by tambourine-rhythm. The overall positive connotation of human dance is indicated not only by the contexts of feast, but also by the attribution of dance to children's cheerfulness. In addition, dance is counted as one of life's habitual activities which together lead to harmony.

The relatively very small database of this study does not enable a detailed examination of the forms of dance. The occurrences of dance with the stem xuļ, supposedly entail a form and manner, i.e. group in circle, but it is not clear what form of dance this stem conveys when it is used for one single dancer. Wright (2002) notes that images from different areas of Ancient Near East show a variety of dance movements and steps in different (cultic) contexts. Study of such movements and steps in the biblical contexts would certainly be informative and would contribute to the cultural profile of dance in BH. In addition, a more detailed examination of feasts and other cultic events in BH, and other related cultures, would probably yield the necessary relevant, comparative information.

Nevertheless it is clear that human dance in BH is a cultural expressive activity with its own structure and rules. Dance, it seems, does not replace the experience and expression of love or joy. Rather, it is a distinguished physical form of experiencing and expressing such emotions, and it is one of the cultural activities necessary for a harmonious, balanced society. Hence a harmonious society is one that affords a time to dance.

References


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