The Nama Stap Dances:  
an analysis of continuity and change among Nama Women  
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Introduction

This article expands the field research carried out over a five year period (2001-2006) among the Nama people who live in !Khubus, South Africa. The Nama may be identified with a sequence of movement that is widely recognized throughout southern Africa as the Nama Stap (Step); the Nama Stap (NS) in turn is the major movement motif of the Nama Stap Dance (NS/D); this movement motif is also the foundation of the Nama Stap Dance-Female Puberty Version (NS/P).1 Despite overt colonial influences within these dances today, the Nama have declared these performance artifacts to be symbols of Nama identity. These dances, I will suggest, contrast with more classical Nama identifiers, such as the matjieshuis (mat house) and the Nama language itself. Further, this article attempts to provide an appreciation of the Nama, especially Nama women, through an analysis and interpretation of the Nama Stap motif as it is danced within the Nama Stap Dance-Puberty Version. Through an integration of selected research methodologies, especially Laban analysis, dance analysis, and field research, an interpretation of the dance is suggested that reveals traditional and contemporary, colonial and post-colonial, markings.2

The Nama

The Khoekhoen are a people whose existence can be traced back 2000 years to the Cape area of what is today South Africa. In pre-colonial times the Khoekhoen were nomadic herdsmen, driving their cattle and sheep between suitable areas of grazing and watering as the seasons dictated. Their possession and maintenance of livestock distinguished them from hunter-gatherers of the region such as the Soaqua or San. Their lifestyle and social organisation were defined by their need to find pasture and water for their herds. The language of the Khoekhoen is still spoken by a few thousand inhabitants of the Kalahari along the Orange River. They were once thought to be extinct, but direct descendants of the people who inhabited the Cape
for a millennium prior to the arrival of any European still live in the harsh outback which forms South Africa’s frontier with Namibia.

The Nama are the best known of Khoekhoen peoples (Barnard, 1992). Two groups of Nama are distinguished: the Great Nama who live in Great Namaqualand in Namibia and Little Nama who reside in Little Namaqualand in the north-western region of South Africa. In order to construct a documentation of Nama dancing, this research examines the lifestyle of the Nama of !Khubus village, Little Namaqualand.

Roots of the Nama Stap Dance

Agnes Hoernlé is often referred to as the ‘mother of South African anthropology’ (Barnard and Spencer, 1996). During her field research among the Nama between 1912 and 1913, Hoernlé recorded various rite of passage activities. Among these is her description of the Nama female puberty ceremony. Her account of this ritual is one of the earliest and remains one of the most detailed recordings of this historic rite of passage among Nama women. The ceremony recorded by Hoernlé no longer exists. Instead, the Nama Stap Dance-Puberty Version is now performed. Although this modern day version incorporates many aspects of the historical ceremony, such as dancing and presentation of an initiate, the historic ceremony is no longer celebrated. Despite its demise in this form, the Nama have maintained dancing as part of their contemporary interpretation, and in spite of the changing role of women within Nama society, a theme of female unity remains an aspect of the contemporary version. This research offers a view of why the ceremony still exists and is performed by women who can no longer bear children.

No single perspective provides the basis for my analysis and interpretation of the Nama Stap and Nama Stap dances; instead, various methods have been integrated in order to construct an appreciation of this structured movement system.  

Engaging anthropological and ethnographic perspectives through fieldwork,
distance and participant observation, a Labanotation score of the Nama Stap was created.

**Movement Notation**

Movement notation as a form of documentation has had an influence on dance and dancing throughout the 20th century. The documentation of dances in graphic notation has, for example, created tangible resources making possible the compilation of a history of dancing. Archives of notated dance scores have allowed dance literacy and the ability to read dances has contributed to dance education and to the academic study of dancing. Movement notation has provided tools of observation and analysis for dance research generally and ethnochoreology especially. Critics and practitioners of graphic forms of notation air differing views on issues of interpretation, complexity of notation systems, and on the appropriateness of movement notation itself. Such debate has exposed some of the limitations of graphic forms of movement notation. Although Laban analysis has achieved recognition as a means of analysing and recording human movement, particularly dances, its application has largely been restricted to movement practices of western origin. Documentation of the dances of African peoples, for example, is practically non-existent.

Systems for the graphic documentation of movement and/or dance have existed for centuries. Ann Hutchinson Guest is the recognised authority not only of Labanotation, but also of systems of dance notation generally. Her texts, *Labanotation, The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement* (2005), *Choreo-Graphics A Comparison of Dance Notation Systems from the Fifteenth Century to the Present* (1989), and *Dance Notation The Process of Recording Movement on Paper* (1984) are major sources of information on this topic. This discussion will address Labanotation (LN) and Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) as they apply to this research.

In the Laban system of movement notation, symbols are standardised to represent parts of the body and the movements they are capable of making. By combining symbols representing arms, legs, hands and feet with those representing bending, stepping, folding, jumping or twisting, the Labanotator is able to record all human movement. Labanotation relates to various forms of time and is harmonious
with current multi-media technology. This, however, is only part of the story. Movement is more than a mere change in position. It is a process of change…[it] is that activity which occurs between the starting and finishing stances (Moore and Yamamotao, 1988). The ability of a system of movement notation to distinguish between ‘position’ and ‘motion’ is essential to an understanding (and documentation) of African dance forms. African dance scholar Kariamu Welsh Asante clarifies this point,

African dance is polyrhythmic, polycentric, and holistic with regard to motion rather than being postural or position-oriented as an essential requisite…it is the movement that is challenging scholars, and choreographers of African dance to define, structure, and codify it (Welsh Asante, 1985a, pp. 71-72, italics added).

Anthropologist Brenda Farnell also points out the necessity to distinguish between these,

It is not uncommon to find actions reduced to a position or to a sequence of positions…such that a series of photographs, sketches, diagrams, or positions of limbs plotted on a two dimensional graph are presented as records of movement (Farnell, 1994, p. 929, italics added).

The concept of movement as a process of change is central to the Laban system.

While a Labanotator may describe movement purely in terms of movement from one point to another, a Laban Movement Analyst understands movement in terms of its dynamic and spatial dimensions. The method examines the manner in which the body changes in response to internal and external stimulation (shape changes), analyses the energy flow of movement and distinguishes the time, space, and weight required to achieve it; these changes are collectively termed Effort. When used together these two aspects of Laban’s system (LN and LMA) give an energetic picture of the human body in motion; a representation of the inner and outer nature of motion. Though both divisions of the system have their origins in the work of Rudolf Laban, they have developed along separate paths; it is not usual for the two to be applied systematically at the same time. This distinctive evolution of the two provides, in itself, an interesting history.
The Laban analysis of the Nama Stap and Nama Stap Dances is atypical in that, first, it acknowledges both Nama and observer perspectives and also considers regional sources apart from the central source of !Khubus. Further, since it facilitates a greater degree of consistency and accuracy of recording, it is noteworthy that Laban analysis (the use of Labanotation and Laban Movement Analysis as a single tool) is used to distinguish the movement components of the Nama Stap (NS) and Nama Stap Dances. This integrated usage enabled a multidimensional examination of the different versions and interpretation of the dances that neither could accomplish on its own. This dual method also allowed swift access to movement content and thus established a base for kinesthetic empathy that allowed swifter entry into this Nama community.\(^5\)

**Western Methodologies**

In coming to an understanding of the Nama Stap the position of the observer must be clarified. While the initial concerns are the theories, methods, and tools that have been employed to assemble the data, ultimately, statements are made and positions taken as a result of applying western methodologies to non-western dance forms. This has been and continues to be a concern of researchers such as anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler (1992) from a dance perspective and Paul Bohannan (1995) from an anthropological one more broadly; both have similar concerns. According to Kaeppler,

> Important in the study of human movement systems is the study of movement theory and philosophy of movement from the point of view of the society in which the movement takes place. The use of Western dance theory for analysis of non-Western dance is inappropriate, and a researcher must attempt to discover indigenous theories about movement (Kaeppler, 1992, pg. 155, 1992).

The application of Laban Movement Analysis/Labanotation, for example, to African Peoples’ dance at the level of method is an on-going question of this research.

**A Movement Signature**

The Nama Stap is the central motif of the Nama Stap Dances.\(^6\) Due to its importance in these dances, this motif can be considered a ‘movement signature’. Movement signature, in this context, is used to signify those movement phrases taken collectively to identify the NS as the NS and not, for example, a Xhosa Step
or a Pas de Chat. A movement signature is readily recognised by indigenous users of it, in this case the Nama, and by knowledgeable outsiders (Kaeppler, 1992a). A movement signature, like a personal, hand drawn one, is not static but, instead, operates within a dynamic range of possibilities. These deviations do not change the fundamental signature itself but reflect responses to momentary internal and external activity. Response to the environment is what allows a movement signature to extend, over time, outside of a range and, ultimately, to develop and to change. The movement signature of the NS described herein should be understood in this light. It represents a constructed movement signature of the Nama during the period of this research.

In order to understand the significance of this motif to the Nama, a movement signature based on an examination of the movement components of the Nama Stap was created. A paradigm similar to that of English grammatical structure was applied to identify this Nama movement marker (Kaeppler, 1992a).

The analysis begins with the identification of kinemes. Kinemes are fundamental units of movement that have no meaning in themselves (Kaeppler, 1992). These kinds of movement might be, for example, steps or a slide as seen in the NS (Figure 2). Taken in isolation, these actions have no significance to the Nama or importance within the Nama Stap. However, like words of a language, they are essential as they are the fundamental elements from which a dance tradition is built (Kaeppler, 1992). Viewed in this way, these individual movement units are like words catalogued in a thesaurus; they must be used in combination with other appropriate movement units in order to make a meaningful statement.

On the other hand, a morphokine ‘is the smallest unit that has meaning in a movement.’ This perspective is founded on the idea that only certain combinations are meaningful and a number of kinemes often occur simultaneously to form a meaningful movement. Morphokines, in turn, combine to form motifs (Kaeppler, 1992, p.154). Based on this analysis, the NS, viewed in conjunction with it other movement components is a motif. The Labananalysis recording illustrates this effectively (Figure 3).
This model addresses not only the ‘grammatical’ structure of movement but also some of the concerns identified previously. Although a western methodology is employed to organise movement observations and to determine movement components, an indigenous perspective is also considered and is primary to any interpretation or evaluation of dancing.

In the case of this research, the Nama Stap as the chief motif in all versions of the Nama Stap Dance observed was confirmed by various different indigenous sources including the principal informant and others in and outside of !Khubus. This is further substantiated by the fact that, among other signifiers, it is the Nama Stap, rather than the Nama Stap Dance that distinguishes one Nama group from another. Some Nama groups, for example, typically slide the feet along the floor (Figure 4), others skim or lift the feet from it (Figure 5), and the youth in !Khubus punch the feet into the ground (Figure 6). While these stylistic differences, in the context of dancing, distinguish one Nama group from another, they also point to similarities between groups and the significance of the Nama Stap motif itself.

The Nama Stap Dance

The title ‘Nama Stap Dance’ is a generic label. When viewed as such, it does not designate a particular dance but is used as an umbrella term that incorporates various activities, such as birthdays, funerals, weddings, and tourist activities at which the Nama Stap is performed. On these occasions the Nama Stap motif may be performed informally where the stepping pattern is featured and no
other motifs systematically accompany it. At other times its usage is defined by the occasion it is used in conjunction with, such as government-sponsored or educational activities.

The various versions of the Nama Stap Dance may be organised into three categories including: social activities, where the Nama Stap Dance is performed locally in conjunction with smaller and more intimate activities; tourist activities, that are typically government-sponsored occasions that may be larger affairs; and educational activities, organised in conjunction with the local school. These groupings are distinguished by a number of factors but of significance to this research the Nama Stap is juxtaposed with the female puberty ceremony (Figure 7).

![Organisational Chart of the Nama Stap Dance]

**Figure 7. Organisational Chart of the Nama Stap Dance**

**A Complex Signifier**

Though the origin of the NS cannot be verified via a western mode of validation (such as a linear chronology of its development), the Nama acknowledge this motif for what it represents for them--an historical link with Nama pre-colonial history. The Nama Stap is a cultural signifier; as such, it serves a dual role. On one level, it is used to represent the Nama as descendents of the original people of South Africa. Alternatively, an improvisational section illustrating rhythmic
embellishments of feet and legs, large spatial orientation, and stamping feet demonstrated by Nama youth, reveal contemporary influences and a more current representation of these descendants of the Khoekhoen (Figure 8).

The Nama Stap motif and the NS performed by youth in !Khubus are the dances that are recognised and performed most frequently throughout South Africa and internationally; as a result, these are the versions that have come to symbolise the Nama people as a group. The Nama Stap Dance-Puberty Version, on the other hand, is symbolic of one particular group of Nama, namely, women.

**Setting Traditional and Contemporary in a Colonial and Postcolonial Context**

The analysis of the Nama Stap Dance-Puberty Version (NS/P) suggests that it may be organised into two sections and this partitioning is not merely structural. The dance may be viewed as a rubric, that is, an established custom or tradition that provides rules for acceptable behaviour (Figure 9).

Part one suggests post-colonial influences and modes of behaviour while at the same time, shadow movements reveal pre-colonial attitudes. The ‘traditional’ Nama Stap motif, for example, is used repeatedly throughout this portion of the dance and guitar music is also part of Nama history. Western dance vocabulary, spatial formation, and patchwork costume point to an acceptance or incorporation of colonial authority. Most significant as signifiers of the tradition are the performers themselves since mature Nama women do the in !Khubus.

Part Two of the NS/P relates directly to the traditional puberty ceremony itself. But, rather than a precise reconstruction of the historic ceremony, this second part of the dance is a re-enactment of the historical heritage of Nama women. Few
historical symbols remain part of the rite. The NS motif, turning patterns, and arm movements comprise the full movement vocabulary. This limited vocabulary is of little consequence as the dancing is to a degree secondary. The focus is on the performers themselves, especially the initiate and the embodiment of the theme of the ritual.

**Themes within the Ritual**

The puberty ceremony was a major rite of passage for Nama females and it marked not only the transition from childhood to full adult membership, but also the division between males and females. Nama females have considerable power as adult members of the Nama community.

Early Nama were sometimes hunters and at other times herders, and Nama women could inherit stock in their own right and maintain these distinct from male relations even after marriage. Through this system, women gained considerable power (and independence) and some women even became regents or temporary chiefs (Vedder, cited in Barnard, 1992, p.185). Marriage, linked to supreme authority of the household, could provide women with another avenue of financial independence. Women were able to accumulate stock by means of a system of ‘financial fines’ imposed upon the husband. Most notable in this practice is the fact that it was not the wife who levied such a fine, but the nearest female relative of the husband. This practice necessitated good relationships between female family members and between women in general. In !Khubus, for example I noted that despite the opposition of members of the community, older females supported younger women in the opening of a Gastehuis (Guesthouse) in the central portion of the village as well as a café; and mature women not only maintain the Nama Stap Puberty Version but also oversee the development of the Nama Stap Dance practiced by village youth.

In the traditional ceremony, an elderly woman ‘who had borne many children’ would have attended the initiate, in the contemporary version six mature women attend her. There is no choreographic or historical reason for the increase in number; the dance, according to informants, could be performed with fewer or more couples. The dance leader in the contemporary version, however, can be seen to represent the single elderly attendant of the historic version. The point of her
presence is to reinforce the fact that adult women have rights and power, and could also accumulate independent wealth within Nama society. These rights can be exercised directly and indirectly through the female line. Women, therefore, are reliant on each other. At the end of this section of the NS/P each performer dances with the initiate first, and then other members of the community are invited to join in. This portion of the dance demonstrates the acceptance of the initiate not only into the community as a whole but also into full partnership with Nama women.

An Interpretation

This view of the dance favours an interpretation in which it is used to symbolise revalidation, not merely acceptance, of traditional Nama values and colonial mores especially in regard to Nama women. This reading is based on an analysis of various sources as previously noted. The story of the Nama women is told through dancing. According to informants in !Khubus, and as I have observed, only mature women enact the danced ceremony and in this respect they are sentinels or guardians of it. These women aged approximately sixty years or more, carry certain responsibilities in regard to the dance. They must maintain the ceremony in historical and performance order, clarify its codes, and interpret its significance for Nama female in the present day. Crucially, they have a duty to pass this embodied knowledge on to the next generation of Nama women. But this group is not present in !Khubus.

The Legacy: Lost Generation

!Khubus is sometimes labelled a sleeping town. This identifies a locale as well as a condition in which there is no paid work in the immediate vicinity. Residents must seek employment outside of the community and, where practical, return home in the evening or at weekends. This situation was already apparent when anthropologist W. P. Carstens did his research among the Nama fifty years
ago. Carstens noted that the majority of people in !Khubus lived in extended families (Carstens, 1966, p. 213). During my field-research, school officials reported that grandparents were caring for nearly fifty percent of school-aged children.

The absence of a generation of both men and women, will most certainly affect the community as a whole. There are, for example, economic and social issues surrounding the extended absence of parents from the community; equally disturbing is the concurrent absence of women of this age group and a shift of power from women to men. This transfer of power is indicative of the assimilation of western attitudes generally, especially in regard to women, into the way of life of the Nama of !Khubus as well as other indigenous populations throughout South Africa.

Although this absence has other profound social implications, in terms of Nama legacy as traced through the Nama Stap and the Nama Stap Dances, without the intervention of the remaining mature females and grandmothers in !Khubus, the legacy personified within the Nama female puberty ceremony, along with its (suggested) contemporary post-colonial statement, might well follow the course of male puberty ceremonies recorded by Barnard,

Unfortunately for us, Nama boys’ ceremonies remain poorly recorded, as they disappeared before they could be studied by a competent ethnographer...The female puberty ceremony is better described, and was quite elaborate in comparison to those of other Khoisan groups (Barnard, 1992, p.185).

The Nama Stap and Nama Stap Dance

The NS is part of the movement vocabulary of all residents of !Khubus from the young pre-school child to the eldest grandparent. It, along with the Nama Stap Dance, is part of the primary education programme of the local school that all school-aged children of !Khubus attend. Within the school setting, young dancers are encouraged to not only develop as good Nama Stap dancers but also to be inventive within the form. Through the dance, a competitive spirit is encouraged and nurtured. Within such a structure the future of the Nama Stap, the Nama stap Dance and its messages
will adapt and will remain a dynamic aspect of Nama culture.

The NS/P dance has undergone modification. These adaptations have contributed to its persistence by altering portions of its content to take account of the Christian values of early missionaries. Some of its traditional symbology has been removed such as ‘…dabbing the testicles of each one [boy] with buchu, in order to prevent the acquisition of sexual disease’ (Barnard, 1992, p. 186); others, such as the NS motif, have been added. These changes have not, however, altered the basic structure and sentiment of the ritual; it remains a statement that delineates the status and rights of women and their bonds to each other in traditional and present day Nama society.

Despite its ability to absorb and reflect cultural change thus far, the continuation of the NS/P dance is far from certain. Due to economic necessity, the absence of the generation of women to whom the dance is normally passed on and who, in turn, adapt it to reflect current generational values as they relate to women is a problem in !Khubus. As a result, the dance may cease to exist due to lack of interest by younger women or a generation of women to transmit its values and forms. The possible death of the dance marks not only the disappearance of the dance itself but also a decline in the historical role of Nama women and thus a decline in female solidarity, power, and influence.

**Conclusion**

Researchers have found it problematic to identify the Nama precisely, and various perspectives—archaeology, anthropology, and historical—have been taken to assemble a history of the people who today are called Khoisan. An inability to classify this group clearly, as well as other groups of indigenous peoples, is indicative of a colonial tendency to group different people into a single category regardless of lineage. This research has considered the Nama as descendants of the Khoekhoen. I have proposed a story of the Nama in which they are perceived through an appreciation of Nama dancing, especially the Nama Stap, Nama Stap Dance, and the Nama Stap Dance- Puberty Version.
The investigation has drawn on various paradigms to generate a view of the Nama through which to situate these dances. Amongst these, Labanotation and Laban Movement Analysis have played a key role in the transcription of the dances into a form through which they could be systematically examined. Although single performance trips to Turkey and the United States have been noted, neither the Nama Stap nor the Nama Stap Dance is typically performed outside of southern Africa. A number of historic descriptions of the dance ceremony, on which the puberty dance is based, are accessible and these have been referenced in this work. However, before this work, there were no reliable accounts of the dances, as they exist today. The social, political, and economic realities of contemporary Nama life have influenced the dances and these developments have yet to be fully documented. A study of these dances can take place only in South Africa or Greater Namaqualand. Field research, rather than textual or visual sources, provided the database for this study. This work is the first to foreground Nama dancing.

At the root of this discussion is the notated score that is the product of close analytical study. The tactical application of Labanalysis to an African dance is unusual, as is the notation process. These Nama Dance Scores are the first analyses of the dances and translation of these into graphic form. The dance score is a construct, rather than a definitive statement; it is a synthetic interpretation of my research experience in the field and in the library. The score is, however, not merely a documentation of the movement vocabulary of the dances, it is another cultural product.

The Nama Stap Dance dramatically asks the question: what is considered ‘African’ dance or what is meant by the expression ‘African dance’? Nama dancing has been so highly colonised that, except for the fact that the people who perform it are black and are known to be Nama, it could be mistaken for a European social dance transplanted to South Africa. This blurring of dance styles and categories is not peculiar to the Nama but is likely to be applicable to groups of people who have experienced similar colonial infringement of their cultural heritage.

This research has sought to understand the dance as well as the dancing of the Nama via an appreciation of the Nama Stap, Nama Stap Dances and the people who do the dancing. Like Nama history etched in stones and pained on cave walls, this research has provided a record, a documentation, and an interpretation of
dancing that reveals and archives the changing role and status of Nama women during the period of the research. It is a fascinating story about women that is subtly revealed through dancing.

Notes
1. I have labelled this version of the dance ‘Nama Stap Dance-Female Puberty Version’ in order to distinguish it from the better know Nama Stap Dance.

2. The content of this article relates to fieldtrips undertaken in Namaqualand, South Africa between 2001-2006 as part of my doctorial research titled: Nama Marks and Etchings: employing movement analysis techniques to interpret the Nama Stap.

3. According to Kaeppler, structured movement systems are ‘systems of knowledge which are socially constructed...they are created by, known, and agreed upon by a group of people and primarily preserved in memory.’ (Kaeppler, 1992a).

4. Labanotator Odette Blum has noted some of the disadvantages or limitations of a score and/or notation system. These include: one has to know the notation system and this takes some time; a good interpretation depends on the notation [and contextual] knowledge, reading skills, imagination, and integrity of the notator/reconstructor (Blum, 1986, p. 39.); other researchers have commented that systems of notation record ‘still’ positions rather than the ‘motion’ of the body (see also Farnell, 1994; Welsh Asante, 2000, 1996a, 1985a).

5. Kinesthetic empathy involves physical identification with the movements one observes being executed. The easiest way to experience kinesthetic empathy is to attend to how you use your own body while watching an exciting sports event or a tense mystery program. Most involved fans find themselves muscilarly participating in the event, that is, making motions like those being observed, only smaller and more subtle. These participative movements of kinesthetic empathy, drawing on imitation and movement memory, can be a valuable extension of visual perception in the understanding of human movement (Moore and Yamamoto, 1988, p. 53-54).

6. Motifs are culturally grammatical sequences of movement made up of kinemes and morphokines. They are movement pieces that combine certain morphokines in characteristic ways and are verbalized and recognized as motifs by the people themselves. Motifs are ordered simultaneously and chronologically (choreographed) into grammatical sequences to form dances (Kaeppler, 1992a, p. 154).

7. Shadow movements may be defined as...secondary movements accompanying and intertwining with the forms (Bartenieff and Lewis, 1980, p.109).

8. Basically, all specialists would agree that the Khoisan peoples include speakers of numerous click-using languages which belong to some four or five
language families, subfamilies or groups. The linguistically ‘generic’ relationship between all Khoisan languages have yet to be established beyond question, but most specialists do assume for reasons of practicality that we can at least speak of a Khoisan phylum or superfamily. Briefly, Khoisan language families or subfamilies include Khoe (also know as Khwe-Kovab or Hottentot), !Kung (Ju), Ta’a (including !Xõ), !Wi, and tentatively ‘South-western’ or ‘Cape’ (/Xam) (Barnard, 1992, p. 22-23).

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