


## DANCE

# Communication through Dance

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have always used dance as a mode of communication. The following article contains information about communication through dance.

## CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

 Sustainability

## CONTENT AREAS

**H** History


**G** Geography

**A** The Arts (Dance)

**CC** Civics and Citizenship

**H+PE** HPE

## GENERAL CAPABILITIES

 Intercultural Understanding

 Critical and Creative Thinking

 Personal and Social Capability

## KEY CONCEPT

Communication through Dance: Dancing is a form of nonverbal communication ... The meanings associated with messages sent by people who are dancing in a social setting are evident through the codes of space, touch, facial expressions, and eye contact.

Peick, 2005

## SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › non-verbal communication
- › traditional culture
- › cultural revival
- › wellbeing
- › ancestry
- › performance
- › ritual

## GUIDING QUESTION

What are Aboriginal people communicating through dance?

This printed material is **to be used with Dance – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource** that can be found at [www.theorb.tas.gov.au](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au)

The Living Cultures Dance resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

# Introduction

Traditional dance is not just about the routine and the choreography. It's about the significance of what it is they are doing, what they're learning, what they're passing on. It's not just about the movements.

Sinsa Mansell, 2017



Sinsa Mansell and students at St Helens, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

The importance of teaching or the passing of knowledge through dance is a common theme among contemporary Aboriginal people. While it is important for today's Aboriginal community to teach and learn about dance, this passing of knowledge is, in and of itself, a time-honoured tradition and cultural practice. Information and knowledge about all aspects of life was contained in, and communicated through, dance.

The early colonists recorded many instances of people dancing. These records include journal entries, government reports and artworks such as the one on page 3 painted by the British landscape artist John Glover, who arrived in Hobart in April 1831.

While paintings provide some information about the dances the colonists witnessed, they do not reveal what was being communicated through these dances.



Natives at a corrobory, under the wild woods of the Country (Jordan River below Brighton)  
John Glover, c. 1835 | State Library of New South Wales IR223061

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## Traditions of Dance

Historically, through the medium of dance, Tasmanian Aboriginal people have been able to communicate and share environmental knowledge. This has been observed by many people. One such observer was James Backhouse who arrived in Hobart in February 1832.

In these dances the aborigines represented certain events or the manners of different animals; they had a horse dance, an emu dance a thunder and lightning dance, and many others.

Backhouse cited in Roth 1968: 138

Craig Everett and sons Mitchem and CJ performing the Cape Barren Geese Dance, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd



George Augustus Robinson, in a number of journal entries made during the so-called Friendly Mission (1829-1834), provides some detail of his understanding of the dances he witnessed.

The natives danced, which these people call kar.ne.plee.lare. What before I was acquainted with these people and language appeared foolishness, now appeared to me interesting. The motion of the body is the shifting attitude to avoid the spear in fighting; sometimes they call out 'the spear is coming'. One dance was a relation of a man who was with me named

tar.ne.bun.ner, who had been chased by a man on horseback with a long whip, and of his outrunning the horse. The other dances related the hunting of kangaroo or some battle or an amorous story.

1 November 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 297

### DISCUSSION QUESTION

- › What aspects of life are able to be communicated through dance?

## Communicating the New

In his journals Robinson recorded details of various horse dances performed by different peoples, communicating their own experiences of these strange new animals.

One of the dances consisted in crawling round the fire upon their hands and knees, in doing of which they move at a slow pace, shake their heads in imitation of the horse, then stop and imitate the horse in feeding then move on, then lay down with their backs to the fire; this they repeat. The same motion made by the first is observed by all the rest.

23 November 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 316

Robinson refers to another horse dance which he recorded as the par.kute.ten.ner kar.ne.plee.lare.ne dance.

This originated in the circumstance of tar.ne.bun.ner having outrun a man on horseback, who was in pursuit of him. Several men perform the part of horses: they stoop down and lean their hands upon the back of their companion and then walk round the fire singing; sometimes they run to imitate galloping. One man acts as driver and he has a bough for a whip, with which he strikes them and makes them go fast. Another man runs beside the horses in imitation of a dog—and performed his part exceeding well, shaking his head and appearing frightened, then stopping, then running.

15 November 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 312



State Library of New South Wales IR230555

Tonight the whole of the natives joined in the dance, which was kept up till a late hour. The dance tonight consisted of the *pare.kute.ten.ne karneplelare*, which was gone through with great eclat to gratify me, it being my favourite dance. In performing this dance they walk slow, stoop the body and shake the knees and hands and head. The whole body is in motion to imitate the movements of the horse. They then alternately run and one keeps striking them with boughs to imitate the driver. dog moves but don't sing. The whole party moves together: the motion made by the first is observed by all the rest. It is admirably done.

24 November 1830

Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 316-317

Below we can see a sketch from Robinson's journal depicting the *par.kute.ten.ner kar. ne.ple.lare.ne* dance.



Horse Dance 15 November 1830 | Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 312

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › Are these horse dances communicating the same information?
- › What non-verbal techniques are being used in these dance?
- › What do these horse dances tell us about how Aboriginal people adapted their storytelling, through dance, to changing circumstances?

# Purposeful Communication



Danny and Manala Gardner at Risdon Cove, 2017 | Image: Dcnstrct Pty Ltd

In the photo above we see Danny Gardner and his son, Manala, enacting a creation story involving the kangaroo and the emu. Danny tells this story to his son through the dance by imitating the animals' movements. His knowledge of the animal is integral to the dance.

So Manala, we do this dance because the two animals in it are our special animals, they're a part of our creation. It's the emu, and the kangaroo, okay? The first Aboriginal man ... was created as a kangaroo, so we [were] kangaroos like this. And we would hop around everywhere like this. And we would

eat like this. And we might do big jumps. And then they might scratch. And sniff. And shake. They do that to keep the flies off their back, okay?

Danny Gardner, 2017



Craig Everett and CJ at *Irapuna*, 2017 | Image: Dcnsctrct Pty Ltd

The main reason of dance is to storytell, and the most important reason, in my belief, is connection, not just to country, but to the animals that you're dancing as well. It's not just about going out there and pretending to be a kangaroo or pretending to be an emu or an eagle, it's actually being the eagle. So it's not just trying to copy the movements, it's understanding why they move like that.

So whether it be eating grass or whether it be looking out for hunters, or scratching, that whole process of it is done to be able to connect with that animal, and to show respect for the animal as well, and like I say, it's connection with country.

Craig Everett, 2017

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What knowledge and understanding are Danny, Craig and their sons drawing on when they dance?
- › Why would it be important for all of these stories to be repeatedly re-enacted through dance?

[www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/dance/teacher-drawer](http://www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/dance/teacher-drawer)

## REFERENCES

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