Moving the Past. Embodied Research on Discontinued Movement Cultures

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Moving the Past

Embodied Research on Discontinued Movement Cultures

Edited by
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Maciej Talaga, Editor

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Introduction

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Physical or bodily practices function not only as practical means to address basic human needs, such as preparing food or taking care of one's health, but as cultural expressions as well. Almost a century ago, Marcel Mauss observed that body techniques vary across cultures and times, sometimes playing important roles as constituents of collective or personal identities.[1] A specific method of doing something may become widely recognised as characteristic of particular group or even individual, as in the cases of the 'Dagestani drag' in modern freestyle wrestling or 'Cruyff turn' in football/soccer. More recently, Jürgen Streeck demonstrated that hand gestures not only communicate, but also participate in the cognitive process by facilitating exploration of one's own thoughts and anchoring them in the space shared with others.[2] All this draws attention to the historical, societal, and technical dimensions of physical practices, or simply movements.

Movement culture and (dis)continuity

Inspired by Henning Eichberg's conceptualisation, in the present volume we focus on 'movement culture', understood as a subset of the broader category of physical culture.[3] While physical culture encompasses all practices, philosophies, and traditions surrounding the body's physical and aesthetic development, movement culture focuses on the embodied practices – activities like sports, dance, or martial arts – in their technical, kinaesthetic concreteness. How these movements are cultivated reveals much about the values, priorities, and identities of their practitioners and the societies they inhabit. Less intuitively, those practices that fall out of favour and lose continuity can also teach us a lot about the same societies and the cultural processes responsible for their thriving and decline. This volume aims to venture into this counter-intuitive avenue, which has so far been trodden but modestly by scholars, and delve into the complex question of discontinued movement cultures. By examining how these practices can be studied, reconstructed, and revitalised, we hope to unveil the potential for bridging historical gaps in understanding human movement and its cultural significance.

Continuity in living movement culture is primarily maintained through the active transmission of knowledge and practice from practitioners to practitioners. This involves both formalised instruction and informal learning. For example, dance styles or martial arts are often transmitted through apprenticeship, relying on master-student relationships to preserve their techniques and philosophies. This transmission typically includes tacit knowledge – those subtle, embodied skills that cannot be codified but are integral to the practice. The presence of living practitioners ensures the adaptation and evolution of practices in response to new contexts while maintaining their cultural essence. The resilience of a movement culture depends on various factors, including its adaptability, relevance to contemporary society, and institutional support. When these elements are in place, practices often flourish and grow. However, when they are disrupted – due to colonisation, modernisation, or changing cultural priorities – the continuity of these practices can be threatened.

[1] Mauss 1971, originally published in French in 1934.
[2] Streeck 2009; he notes that even the common English verb 'to comprehend,' referring to abstract reasoning and intellectual understanding, derives from the mundane, literal action of prehending, that is, grasping with the hand.
[3] Eichberg 2009.

Analogously, discontinued movement cultures are those in which the living chain of transmission has been broken, leaving no active practitioners to continue the tradition. These lost practices exist only in fragmented traces – artefacts, textual records, iconography, or oral history. With their original context lost, these cultural forms often seem frozen in time. Yet, the fragments provide valuable insights into the lives and values of past societies and offer potential pathways for reconstruction.

Historical European martial arts as a discontinued movement culture

Research into discontinued movement cultures involves meticulous analysis of historical and material traces. A promising area of study is Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA), which groups modern practitioners reconstructing combat systems from the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Initially a non-academic endeavour, it started to draw the attention of academicians in the 21st century, with scholars like Daniel Jaquet, Timothy Dawson, Bartłomiej Walczak, and this author proposing more or less formalised methods for interpreting martial arts manuals, weaponry, and artistic depictions to revive combat techniques.[4]

HEMA distinguishes itself within the broader area of martial arts studies by focusing explicitly on practices with no living transmission, relying on archaeology and historical sources to reconstruct movement.[5] Comprising practices that used to be culturally significant in the past and still have allure in contemporary society, such as swordsmanship or wrestling, HEMA is also embedded in a wider cultural context. In the past, martial arts functioned in a reciprocal relationship with other bodily practices, such as health regimens or military drills, modes of self-expression, as well as intellectual currents. Nowadays, they respond to collective interest in or nostalgia for the past, reflected in contemporary medievalisms in cinema, video games, and fantasy literature.[6] This multi-sidedness and research potential renders HEMA a phenomenon worthy of study by historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. It is also a unique field demanding unorthodox approaches, in which bodily practice is an integral part of the research strategy.

Embodied archives and reconstructing movement cultures

A crucial concept in studying discontinued practices is the 'embodied archive', understood as skill – intangible, tacit, performative potential and knowledge – sedimented and stored in human bodies in result of years of acculturation and training. Sarah Kenderdine, Lily Hibberd, and Jeffrey Shaw consider these archives – the tacit knowledge embodied in living practitioners – as a crucial resource responsible for keeping bodily practices alive and the key component of intangible cultural heritage.[7] These scholars posit that while the human body holding the embodied archives cannot be preserved forever, the content of the archives can be captured and preserved indefinitely in immersive digital forms. Even more importantly for the present argument, they argue that, once properly digitised, embodied archives can be used to virtually reenact historical practices in different settings, allowing researchers to unlock new insights into lost traditions. For instance, the *Remaking Confucian Rites* project uses computer modelling to simulate and reenact ancient Chinese rituals. This method combines cutting-edge technology with human performance, enabling repeated iterations and refinements of ritual practices. In their paper, Kenderdine, Hibberd, and Shaw argue that such processes make the ephemeral aspects of heritage tangible and analysable, offering a radically new approach to understanding discontinued intangible heritage:

[4] Dawson 2016; Jaquet and Kiss 2015; Jaquet 2016a; Talaga 2020; Talaga, Wrzalik, and Janus 2021; Talaga and Ridgeway 2020; Walczak 2011, 2022.
[5] Islas and Jennings 2023; for a general introduction into the martial arts studies as an academic field, see Bowman 2017.
[6] Alvestad and Houghton 2021.
[7] Kenderdine, Hibberd, and Shaw 2021.

> *The large-scale operation to record, encode and display the tacit contents of the Archery Rite reveals some of the potential for its renewed transmission through virtual interaction, presence and immersion within Confucian ritual knowledge systems. As it couples reenactment with the power of computational modelling, this approach could unlock and revivify (...) the ritual expressions of the modern Confucian body.*[8]

While the results of such technologically driven projects are impressive, they are not the only way to approach the study of discontinued practices. Grassroots communities, such as HEMA practitioners, demonstrate that valuable research can emerge from collective efforts with limited resources. These communities engage in hands-on experimentation, testing hypotheses through physical practice, and generating data that enrich the academic study of movement cultures. Leveraging their expertise to re-stage and analyse certain aspects of discontinued intangible heritage, like Kenderdine *et al.* did with digital models, is a distinct theoretical possibility even without harnessing expensive advanced technologies. Indeed, there is a compelling argument for prioritising human embodiment over digital prostheses as the primary 'storage' medium for intangible cultural heritage. Unlike static digital models, living practitioners offer a dynamic and adaptive approach to preservation. In living cultures, it is them that embody the practices, adapting movement cultures to new contexts while remaining anchored in historical authenticity. In discontinued practices, this approach promises that that reconstructed cultural heritage becomes a living, evolving movement culture rather than a fossilised relic confined to (virtual) museums.

Aims of the book

A few years ago, in an afterword to three milestone conferences on historical European martial arts studies, Daniel Jaquet noted that the future of this field depends on the scholars' ability to reconcile experiential research rooted in hands-on practice with the rigour of academic historical inquiry:

> *More proof of concepts and case studies should appear in publication to help minimise confusion about the scholarly value of experiencing and experimenting within historical martial arts. As with other fields of martial arts studies, innovative ways of bridging the gap between researcher and practitioner must be found, as well as new approaches on the matter of how to actually publish research on embodied knowledge.*[9]

The present volume responds to this call and goes even further by offering a collection of case studies seeking to highlight how even discontinued movement cultures – not only martial arts – can be revitalised and embodied in the present. By combining academic research, practical experimentation in the broadest sense, and community engagement, we argue that it is possible to bridge the gap between contemporary practice and historical knowledge. If textual (historical) and material (archaeological) sources reflecting discontinued movement cultures are approached by today's researchers as constraints limiting and structuring their creativity and imagination, then the present practice and embodied knowledge developed within these limits will gradually grow closer to the historical. And even when it does not, the failure may expose the discrepancies between the past and the present that would otherwise remain hidden. The contributions collected in this book made explicit or implicit use of this principle, demonstrating that this approach not only deepens our understanding of the past but also enriches the cultural landscape of the present.

Finally, this volume seeks to reveal an important gap in the discourse on intangible cultural heritage. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage from 2003 emphasises the protection of living traditions but does not directly address discontinued practices. As a result, intangible heritage with no living practitioners often exists in a state of limbo,

[8] Kenderdine, Hibberd, and Shaw 2021: 263.
[9] Jaquet 2016b: 120.

neither fully recognised nor actively preserved. By demonstrating that discontinued practices can be meaningfully studied and embodied today, we hope to draw scholarly and institutional attention to these neglected aspects of cultural heritage. Such phenomena as HEMA show that present communities of practice may emerge spontaneously in response to an organic yearning for the revival of discontinued movement cultures, opening unique potential for reconstructing and safeguarding lost cultural heritage.

Synopsis of the chapters

The main part of the volume opens with a theoretical contribution by Bartłomiej Walczak, titled *Triangle of Diverging Incentives*. The chapter supplements the general theoretical and methodological remarks laid out in this *Introduction* by describing the specific challenges involved in embodied research on antagonistic practices, with the author's perspective informed mostly by the study of late-medieval European martial arts based on surviving textual sources. Designed as an expansion to previously published research framework, it introduces important theoretical distinctions dividing the holistic process of Reconstruction of past embodied technique into three complementary areas, tentatively labelled as Re-enactment, Reworking/Reproduction, and Resurrection/Revival. Through a systematic analysis of these, the author provides a practical set of guidelines helping researchers better design embodied studies employing contemporary practice to understand historical movement cultures.

In *Leveraging Reenactment and Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) for the Understanding of Ancient Combat*, Paul M. Bardunias and Benjamin R. Truska offer a case study on ancient Greek hoplite warfare illustrating the methodological challenges involved in studying collective antagonistic behaviour in the absence of explicit technical literature and specialised iconographic sources. They demonstrate how the materiality of artefacts and human bodies engaged in the investigated embodied practices create a set of constraints which can be used to create experimental settings using contemporary subjects to test hypotheses about the past. Acknowledging embodied skill as a crucial experimental variable, Bardunias and Truska discuss also the benefits of cooperation between researchers of past movement cultures and present communities of practice cultivating expertise in adjacent areas.

A similar challenge, complicated by the scarcity of sources, is tackled in *Crooks, Hooks, Tips, and Taps* by Ruadhán MacFadden. Taking on the task of reconstructing an entirely extinct folk wrestling style from Ireland, the author had to make use of what was available – a handful of 19th-century photographs and first-hand descriptions, linguistic data, and his own body as a supplementary research tool. The results obtained this way are presented and critically evaluated, revealing both the potential and limitations of embodied research on discontinued movement cultures. An interesting aspect of the study is the interpersonal cooperation necessitated by reconstruction of wrestling techniques, which cannot be meaningfully explored through and within a single human body. Exploration of this question led the author to ponder the possibility of (re)creating a community of practice as both a result and a crucial part of the process of reconstruction.

In contrast, the next chapter deals with a research environment rich in material relics as well as technical literature providing both textual and iconographical reference for the investigated practices. *Gripping Affordances of Select Post-Medieval European Sidearms* by Jerzy Miklaszewski is an in-depth study of the reciprocal interaction between artefact design and movement culture, as exemplified by post-medieval cold steel weapons. By carefully juxtaposing the anatomy of human hand with the hilts found on surviving post-medieval sabres and broadswords from European collections, Miklaszewski reconstructs the material substrate which gave birth to period's swordsmanship methods, each a

highly-specialised movement culture in itself. This allows him to establish a data-based point of reference for the contemporary practices based on the study of historical fight books and weaponry.

Boots on the Ground by Charles Lin takes the readers again away from scrupulous analyses of archaeological artefacts and their representation in period technical literature. Instead, the study centres on the human bodies cooperating with material objects to confront the physical challenge of marching. Being an account of an embodied investigation undertaken by a team of seasoned medieval reenactors, it demonstrates how relatively abstract questions, such as 'how does it feel to march like a late-medieval infantryman?', can be structured into a coherent and informative study design without the rigidity of formal experimental method. Lin then uses the experiential insights gained during the march to highlight the agency of the physical environment (landscape, infrastructure), human bodies (physiology, conditioning), social dynamics (discipline, mutual support), and cultural factors (artefacts to carry, expected pace) in shaping the past and present performances.

In the next chapter, titled *Going Medieval on the Body*, Maciej Talaga and Krzysztof Kozak contribute another embodied study relying primarily on experiential insights. However, unlike in the previous chapter on marching, their research is not based on a single event but rather a prolonged physical engagement with the investigated movement culture – a one-year-long personal exploration of a late-medieval physical conditioning and health regimen reconstructed based primarily on German sources. The longitudinal study design provided an opportunity to explore the emergence of skill over time, the sedimentation of training-induced changes in the body, and the resulting shifts in interpretative perspective on the historical sources. These outcomes then enable moving from narrowly-understood movement culture (exercises) to higher-order social constructs (body culture in late-medieval Germany) and their reinterpretation.

Finally, the volume is closed with *Coda: Why Moving the Past?*, a short critical-theoretical essay by the editor. Maciej Talaga reflects on the shared insights and methodological commitments that emerge across the volume's diverse case studies. It highlights how embodied reconstructions fit into Walczak's ADVISE method, the methodological postulates of archaeology of motion, and Gibson's theory of affordances, enabling a dynamic engagement with discontinued movement cultures. He emphasises that contributors collectively demonstrated that historical practices, though fragmented or forgotten, can be meaningfully revived through interdisciplinary, ethically reflective experimentation. In doing so, their results call for an expanded understanding of intangible cultural heritage that would embrace not only continuous traditions but also those reclaimed through experiential yet critical research.