



## Faroese chain dancing

### Description

I'm just back from a short break in the Faroe Islands. One evening I was standing in the reception area of our hotel when I heard the faint sound overhead of robust voices in unison accompanied by the slow rhythm of what seemed like feet stamping on the floor.

The next day we were at the National Museum of the Faroe Islands in Torshavn where I watched a vintage film of people of various ages holding hands in a continuous line, or perhaps a loop, and stepping sideways, two steps to the right and one step to the left. The idealised form of this dance created a human circle. In small domestic settings that circle would turn into a space-filling sinew of rhythmic bodies brushing past one another. That motion motored the human snake through the room.

What I had heard in the floor above was later confirmed by the hotel reception to be a private function in celebration of a 25th wedding anniversary, entailing the customary chain dance.

Our guidebook said little about the chain dance, but it is certainly a custom of note. There's an artwork in the undersea road tunnel of human silhouettes holding hands around a traffic roundabout. (See the featured image.) It was a representation of the same traditional dance.

An academic article by Tárna Arnadottir explains the significance of the dance as a communal memory aid, a way of recalling and reinforcing the words of the long sagas and legends as told in the songs. It's also a dance in which all in the community participate, irrespective of gender and age. The dance form was a way of continuing a sense of national identity, though not without ironic aspects as appreciated by current generations in the information age according to Arnadottir.

## Mesmeric space

From online videos of the dance it struck me that there's a trance-like quality to the movement. There's little about the induction of trance states in relation to the Faroese chain dance in this particular article, though in an article in the same volume Terry Gunnell refers to a ring dance in other Nordic settings inducing a strong sense of trance-like liminality and communitas amongst the

women involvedâ?• [684].

ChatGPT helped me round out an architectural take on the chain dance. It conjectured that in smaller Faroese houses â?? where many dances historically took place during long winter nights â?? space was often extremely limited. Unlike the expansive circles possible outdoors or in modern festival halls, dancers formed densely packed chains that wound back and forth within a single room.

Here is a renewed early 20th century Feroese house interior at the National Museum.



According to ChatGPTâ??s plausible conjecture about the dance, such conditions encouraged close physicality. Participants would slide past one another shoulder-to-shoulder, maintaining the hand grip of the chain. **This intimacy created heightened bodily awareness and reinforced collective identity through physical proximity.**

As I observed on film, the chain had to bend, coil, and weave to fit the confines of the room. This added an improvisatory element, where the dance adapted to architectural constraints, â??**folding mythic time into domestic space.**â?•

The confined setting amplified sensory immersion â?? voices reverberated in low-ceilinged rooms, while bodily synchrony was magnified by the tactile continuity of the chain. The experience of sliding

past others in near-darkness, with only the drone of the ballad, likely contributed to the trance-like quality.

Through collective movement in close quarters, participants entered another temporality and another imaginative world. So **the confined-space version of the chain dance exemplifies how architecture, embodiment, and oral tradition intertwine.**

## AI as research aid

ChatGPT then offered to provide a research program that would verify or explore such an outline. To me this exchange suggests how LLMs can be used effectively in research contexts: hypothesising explanations, making or supporting connections between ideas, observations and methods, suggesting references, and generating terms and phrases (indicated in bold above) that drive a project forward.

My motivation in providing this blog post is to demonstrate to myself how an LLM with augmented retrieval generation (RAG) capabilities (i.e. ChatGPT) can aid the researcher in areas other than those ostensibly focussed on digital media and AI.

Also see posts: [Circles and how to get out of them](#) and [Panoptic man](#).

## References

- ÆrnadÁttir, TÁ³ta. â??Chain dancing.â?• In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, edited by JÁ¼rg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 716-726. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Gunnell, Terry. â??Ritual.â?• In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, edited by JÁ¼rg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, 677-686. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

## Category

1. Architecture
2. Artificial Intelligence
3. Podcast

## Tags

1. anthropology
2. body
3. dance
4. domestic space
5. tradition

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