

DANCE AS A SACRED CULT

The question this article poses is: when is the dance sacred? To frame an adequate answer to this question one must tease out all the variables involved in it. The prime variable is the dance itself, and there have been many interpretations of its nature, e.g. as instinctive, as a response to emotion, as an expression of man's spirit. There are also many other factors which influence the forms it may take, including geographical, cultural and ideological ones. Because I am focussing on sacred dance, it is the ideological factors which are of special interest to me in this article.

The aim of this article is to explain the idea that the form of dance which is acceptable in any given conceptual system, from those presented by psychological reductionists to the transcendent systems of Hinduism and Catholicism, is relative to the way each system perceives the nature of the locus of the sacred within it. The possible forms of dance can perhaps be best exemplified on a continuum: from dance forms which are consciously controlled to those which are ecstatic, a state in which the movement and the man are out of control. This latter state is one of extreme physiological and emotional arousal. It gives man a feeling of being "outside" himself. The *functions* of the dance may be *explicit* when they involve the intentionality of the dancer, or group from which he dances; or *implicit* when they are accomplished by the nature of the dance form, e.g. communal ordered dance leads to a feeling of social solidarity.

I. *Paradigms and loci of the sacred*

Man has variety of ways of using his world. The meaning man makes out of experiences in his world depends on the paradigm which he uses to interpret these experiences. From among many possible paradigms, I have focussed during my research on four: the psychological, sociological, anthropological and religious, which I treated as conceptual systems, each with its own particu-

lar locus of the sacred. In order to highlight this locus of the sacred, I have labelled these systems: *individual, social, magical and transcendent*. I have used them as the basis for a 'classification system of dance forms' in relation to dance functions, which I will present later.

The concept of "sacred" has occupied the attention of scholars such as Otto (1924), Eliade (1958) and Smart (1978). This concept may be interpreted as only relative to a transcendent power source. But it can also be treated as a variable which is related to whatever is perceived as the source of "sacred power" in a conceptual system. Power can be considered in terms of personal authority or political control. But there is a power dimension in every human context which can be distinguished from pragmatic forms of power by its intensity and inherent mystery: it cannot be clearly defined by the individual or group, yet its presence and importance are felt; it is irreducible to any other phenomenon with which men are familiar. Because of its intensity, it demands a response; because of its mystery, it demands interpretation. This power, I consider, is open to interpretation, as sacred power. It can be generated by the individual or group, or can emanate from objects or elements of nature, or be lodged in a transcendent entity or state. These may be considered the *loci* of the sacred in different conceptual systems. Man becomes aware of this sacred power, because it is manifest: directly through experiences of people, places, events; or indirectly through exposure to tradition in a conceptual system where the label "sacred" has been applied to various forms, myths and symbols, after generations of reflection upon direct experiences of sacred power.

One may postulate that those experiences are "sacred" which place man in relation to sacred power as it is perceived within his conceptual system. Dance is one of the ways in which man has always related to this sacred power. In the light of what has been said, I would consider that *dance as sacred which was performed from a position of sacred power, or directed towards a source of sacred power*. In other words, sacred dance issues from or is directed towards the locus of the sacred in any given conceptual system. It is reasonable to suppose that some dance forms would be more suited to generating power, others to manipulating outside power sources, while still others would facilitate surrender to an ultimate power source. I would like to present the classification system I have evolved, as others may be able to take this idea much further in relation to their own spheres of interest.

The four conceptual systems may be briefly delineated as:

Individual—Source of power is the self. (This could be aligned with the paradigm of the psychological reductionist)

Social—Source of power is the social group. (This could be aligned with the paradigm of the sociological reductionist).

Magical—Source of power is twofold: it is in the magician and in the cosmos. Life is a power struggle. The magician tries to enter the cosmos; cosmic powers may possess him.

Transcendent—The source of power is in some transcendent dimension. Man may believe he has some continuity with it and so try to influence it through dance, or he may believe he has no continuity with it, all he can do is open himself to it as totally other.

The following paradigm illustrates the classification of dance in four conceptual systems:

| Conceptual System | Integrative Function | Dysfunction or Transformative Function |
|-------------------|----------------------|--|
| Individual | Self-integration | Self-disintegration |

Example
of Forms

Social

Example
of Forms

| Magical | Ordering Cosmic Power | Vulnerability to Cosmic Power |
|------------------|---|---|
| Example of forms | —Imitative dances: —animals —fertility —spirits —Cosmic dances —Death dances | Shamanic dance (transformative) Possession trance (transformative) |
| Transcendent | Some continuity with Transcendent power | Surrender to Transcendent power as totally Other |
| Example of Forms | —Ritual dances: Los Seises —Dancing gods: Siva | Ecstatic dance: Mevlevi dervishes Kirtana of Chaitanya |

It may not be possible to discuss all these categories in detail here to show their validity, and demonstrate the relationship between the form and function of the dance, and of each to the locus of the sacred in each conceptual system. However, I will treat the last two categories a little more elaborately because of their relevance to the present context.

2. Transcendent Conceptual System and Continuity with Transcendent Power.

The dances I include in this category will be directed towards a transcendent power from a position of relative powerlessness. Such a dance is that of the Tarahumare Indians of Mexico. They hold that:

the favour of the god may be won by dancing, but what in reality is a series of monotonous movements, a kind of rhythmical exercise, kept up sometimes for

two nights. By dint of such hard work they think to prevail upon gods to grant their prayers.¹

It is an ancient belief that all other worldly movement is dance.² If the analogy is made with cosmic movement, why not with meta-cosmic movement? Christianity emerged in this context, where physically and metaphysically, dance was a prime means of expression. So it is understandable that the early Christians continued to dance in the way they were accustomed to, and that they endeavoured to find a place for the dance in their new scheme of things. The "Hymn of Jesus" is the earliest known Christian ritual, and it is a dance.³ Hippolytus wrote of Christ leading the mystic round dance. Gregory, the wonder worker (213-270), introduced the dance in connection with festivals for martyrs, because of its connection with the heavenly dance.⁴ Dead men sang, according to an inscription of the fourth century:

I dance ring-dances with the blessed saints in the beautiful fields of the righteous.⁵

God is seen as leading the cosmic dance:

God leads the ring-dance of the heavenly bodies. God leads inside the ring, he dances with the praying soul and holds it by the hand as it hopes dancing.⁶

The heavenly ring-dance, according to Backman, was characteristic of a restored harmony and perfection. The idea goes back to Plato, where ideal knowledge could be inbibed from ring-dancing. The Greek mysteries were danced out. Lucian writes:

1. A.E. Crawley, "Processions and Dances", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. Vol. X; J. Hastings, ed; p. 361.
2. E. Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (Norton: N.Y. 1963), p. 6; also G. Vander Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), p. 40; also E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), p. 73.
3. Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (London: Constable, 1923), p. 39; also Vander Leeuw, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
4. Backman, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 39 and p. 45.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Whoever does not dance does not know
what will happen.⁷

Throughout Christian history, circle, line and associated dance forms have been used to petition the God for favours, hallow offerings pay honour to or ask forgiveness of the God, the source of power. Labyrinthine dances were used to celebrate the passage from darkness to light, from sin to salvation. One of the best known "ritual dances" is *Los Seises*. It was authorised in Seville in 1434, but had existed long before; it was forbidden in the late 17th century, but is still performed today. Between ten and fifteen participants form two rows facing each other and move slowly and rhythmically to reverential music for almost an hour. The observer quoted by Backman describes the deep reverence of the dancers and the awe which fell over the congregation.

Backman records how the earliest choristers of the 15th century who performed the dance, had been dressed as angels: a sign that the dance was still interpreted as sacral dance had been in the days of Clement of Alexandria as an imitation of the dance of the angels.⁸ The dance was traditionally performed three times a year; for the Virgin in December; June for Corpus Christi; and at the end of carnival. Its purpose like that of similar ritual dances, is probably best summarised in the 17th century song:

We believe in the bread of life
From Christ to our overflowing joy;
By our dance we supplicate him,
As once the Baptist supplicated.
Therefore by this dance
We strengthen our firm faith
All to the sounds of music.⁹

This is not unlike the style of ordered movement sequences which are being incorporated in contemporary Christian services, set to psalms, readings or music. Ellfelot would call such dances "thematic manipulation". She goes on to say, "the dance itself is not religious, but the costume, music quality, accompanying

narration, have religious overtones.¹⁰ I think this is a valid comment. But it implies that dance can be religious in itself — or that some religious dances are more religious than others. So we come to the intensity of the experience, and the other end of the dance continuum, namely, ecstasy.

3. *Surrender to the Transcendent Power as totally Other*

The dance experience can be so intense that it leads to a state which is similar to that recorded by mystics in various traditions:

When the heart throbs with exhilaration and rapture becomes intense and the agitation of ecstasy is manifested...that agitation is neither foot-play nor bodily indulgence; but a dissolution of the soul...it is a state that cannot be explained in words; without experience no knowledge.¹¹ (Al-Hujwiri)

But experiences have been recorded, and they give us some insight into this ecstatic state, and how it is interpreted. There is a strand running through all major religious traditions, that only the man who loses himself has room for god, or the transcendent, however concerned. Ecstatic dance is one way in which man can "lose himself".

The Christian mystic, the Saivite *bhakta*, the Sufi, the Taoist priest, would all see ecstasy as self emptying, with its correlative of openness to the transcendent, which in this conceptual system, is the locus of the sacred. The Christian is filled with Christ; Siva dances in the heart of his devotee; the whirling Dervish achieves gnosis, and the Taoist priest a state of harmony between the yin and yang.

Among the early Dionysian cults, there was one characterised by the *oreibasia*, a frenzied dance of Maenads and Satyrs in a state known as "enthousiasma"—the state of having the god within one.¹² Similarly, among the *Chassidim*, and eastern Jewish sect of the eighteenth century there was a holy man Zaddick who danced:

10. L. Ellfelot, *Dance from Magic to Art* (Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1976), p. 127.

11. M.G. Wosien, *Sacred Dance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p. 11.

12. E. Ellfelot, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

7. G. Vander Lecuw, *op. cit.*, p. 24

8. Backman, *op. cit.*, p. 79

9. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

...his step was light as that of four-year-old child, and all who beheld his holy dance...there was not one among them who would not have wished to return home, for in the hearts of all who beheld his dance there were both tears and joy.¹³ (Buber).

There is a still more touching example of ecstatic dance from medieval Christianity. Backman narrates the incident quoting from Faerster' edition of the manuscript (1286):

(The Manuscript) treats of a jongleur, dancer and buffoon, who has wandered all over the world and in the end, tired of wandering, comes to the monastery of Claravallis (Clairvaux), into which he was admitted after giving away all he possessed. After admission to the monastery the jongleur noticed that it was not possible for him to participate in the prayers, songs and services of the monks, because he was so ignorant and could not read. Deeply depressed, he sought some means by which he could remedy this and at the same time serve the Holy Virgin. In front of an image of the Virgin Mary on the altar in the crypt he had a sort of revelation that he might serve the Holy Virgin by dancing, and in a prayer to Mary he declared his purpose and dedicated his dancing skill to her services. He hastily undressed and threw away all his clothes and began to dance. He bowed low before the Madonna, 'Most beautiful Queen and beloved Lady, do not despise my art and my service. With God's help I shall serve thee in faith and with all my strength. Then he began to dance with small graceful steps to right and left, sometimes with longer and higher steps. During this dance he performed the Metz dance, the French hop dance, the Champagne hop dance, the Spanish, Lorraine and English hop dances. To these he added the Roman hop dance. He addressed prayers, to the madonna and begged her not to scorn his efforts, but to accept them. Then he danced on his hands and spun his feet in the air, whilst tears streamed from his eyes. Now he has become Her player and dancer...Always

13. Backman. *op. cit.*, p. 12.

he danced until he was exhausted, even to unconsciousness, and after clothing himself he again showed his reverence for Mary.¹⁴

The illustration is typical of its kind to demonstrate how dance, in the context of personal surrender to a transcendent power turns to be a religious *cult* in the best sense of the word. Though the dances the Jongleur performed were traditional "hop" dances, by themselves not necessarily religious, but refined cultural expressions of a people of a milieu and contained *per se* nothing transcendent in the form, the *intentionality* of the dancer, his religious emotion and the locus of his dance made it a "sacred rite," an act of worship, perhaps, one most pleasing and acceptable before God, who understands the hearts of His devotees.

For the *Mevlevi Dervishes*, founded by Jalaluddin Rumi, intuitive knowledge is believed to be maintained by a form of spinning, presided over by an instructor.¹⁵ The method for awakening the five *lataif*, or places of illumination is to concentrate the consciousness upon certain areas of the body and head. As each *latifa* is activated through exercises, the consciousness of the disciple changes to accommodate the greater potentialities of his mind.¹⁶

"Whosoever knoweth the power of the dance dwelleth in God."¹⁷ (Rumi)

Shah suggests that the religious dances of Christianity, Judaism and even those of primitive tribes are a degeneration of this knowledge, which has been pressed into the service of 'spectacle magic or superficial mime.'¹⁸ What Shah seems to be saying is that the dance is essentially mystical, and gnosis is its true goal.

There appears to be so commonly accepted ecstatic dance forms in later Christianity, although some writers classify sects such as Shakers, Quakers and west Indian Christian sects as having group ecstatic dances. There are elements in Pentecostalism which could be examined in this context also. But in the mainstream Christianity the dance has become a metaphysical symbol rather than a ritual act:

14. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

15. I Shah, *The Sufis*, (London: Cape, 1964), p. 225.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

17. C. Sachs, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

Prayer is nothing but a dance hop in so far as it releases us from earth and strives towards heaven.¹⁹

Backman traces the prohibition of religious dances in Christianity stating the following main reasons:²⁰ their association with immoral conduct and "Pagan" cults. The former is understandable given the exotic aspects of the dance act, but the latter points to magical elements in the dance. In order to remove these elements, it would appear, the Church had to eliminate the dance altogether.

In Hinduism, on the other hand, ecstatic forms are still used, or regarded as acceptable. The Hindu god, Siva, unlike the Christian god who has only positive attributes, is a god of ambivalence.²¹ He is a dancing god; he dances out his powers of creation, preservation and destruction as well. He can dance exotically before his bride, or like a madman on the cremation ground. The image of a dancing Siva probably did develop from that of an early shamanic figure, and has been metamorphosed by philosophy, theology and ritual until it reaches its most sublime form: the dance of god in the heart of the devotee.

Chaitanya introduced ecstatic dance into Vaiṣṇavite worship as well, because he recognized its power of emotional evocation. The form of worship was called *kīrtana*,

a method of congregational excitement, by means of enthusiastic chorus singing to the accompaniment of drums and symbols along with rhythmical bodily movements, ending in an ecstatic abandon of dancing... as the tireless recitations of *kīrtana* grew higher and higher, they worked upon the emotions as well as the senses and produced ecstatic thrills and copious perspiration, wild fits, trembling and weeping, hysterical orgy of dancing, dementation, until they are brought to exhaustion and unconsciousness ending in mystic trances.²²

19. Backman, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 154ff.

21. Cf. W. O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Exoticism in the Mythology of Siva* (Oxford: University Press, 1973); also J.B. Long, "Siva and Dionysius-Visions of Terror and Bliss", *Numen*: XVIII (1971) 180ff.

22. Sushil Kuman, *Early History of the Vaiṣṇavite: Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay, (1961), pp. 110ff.

In general, in the Hindu traditions, it was understood that any sacred dance should accompany its own mode of prayer, in chanting, recitals or invocations. This means that the dance in the worship context becomes a sacred act of offering, dedication, glorification, thanksgiving, surrender or adoration, or any other human expression of the deeper existential experience which man realizes by means of appropriate symbols of singing and dancing in the locus of a sacred sanctuary, which bears an indelible mark of divine authority, acknowledged and accepted without questioning for generations.

In my study on the sacred character of dance I have arrived at making an important distinction between:

(i) Dance forms which *lend themselves* to a sacred function, because they have psycho-physiological effects which align them to particular loci of the sacred (one could say their sacred function was implicit).

(ii) Dance forms which man *invests with* a sacred function (one could say their sacred function was explicit).

An interesting pattern emerges when this distinction is applied to the four conceptual systems:

In the "Individual" and "Social" conceptual systems, where the locus of the sacred is concerned in reductionist terms, or within the self or society. *Ordered forms* are likely to be sacred, e.g. tonic movements have an integrative effect on the performer and are, therefore, aligned with the locus of the sacred within the self: Ordered group movement, which creates a feeling of social solidarity is aligned with the locus of the sacred in society. There is a direct relationship between form and function. *Ecstatic forms* may be sacred, if they accomplish a positive function for society, e.g. the ghost dance cult may be a coping mechanism; or for the individual, catharsis. But they may be non-sacred if they are dysfunctional, e.g. choreomania, dance craze.

In relation to the dance continuum, and using the "implicit/explicit" distinction we may summarise our conceptual patterns thus:

| Continuum of dance form | From Conscious control | To Ecstasy |
|--|--|--|
| In Individual and Social conceptual Systems | — Ordered forms of dance are Sacred in their nature because they achieve functional ends for self or society (implicit) | — Ecstatic forms of dance are only sacred if they are also functional for self or society (implicit) |
| In Magical and Transcendent Conceptual Systems | — Ordered dances are sacred only when invested with meaning (explicit) | — Ecstatic dances are open to inter- pretation as sacred because of their nature (implicit), — and they may also be invested with sacred meaning (explicit). |

We may note that in the *Magical* and *Transcendent* conceptual systems, where the locus of the sacred is conceived of in other-than-ordinary terms, ecstatic forms, which generate powerful polyvalent experiences are more likely to be labelled sacred, or at least considered dangerous. But consciously controlled forms, which generate will-power of themselves, may be invested with a sacred function. Thus in the transcendent conceptual system for example, *ordered* ritual dance such as *Los Seises*, may be invested with a sacred function. The movements could just as easily be performed in a dance hall or a market place for entertainment purposes. This is, indeed, the fate of many "religious" dances such as the Morris dance, which have lost their transcendent focus and became popular entertainment forms. But there are *ecstatic* dances in these systems, such as the *kīrtana* of *Vaiṣṇavism*, which give rise to such a profound experience, that they beg interpretation in other-than-ordinary terms. They could not just as easily be performed in a dance hall, because they do not give rise to an experience of pleasure only, but to an experience of awesome abandonment. They give rise to an experience which is open to interpretation as sacred; then they may be further invested with a sacred function.

Another observation one may make is the fact that explicit sacred functions are only found in the latter two conceptual systems. This may be because the locus of the sacred is *outside* man (as well as *in* the magician), rather than inside man or his society. Man as meaning-maker responds to these outside power sources by investing certain movement patterns with a sacred function. There appears to be a dialectic between the categories in the magical and the transcendent systems, which does not operate in the individual and social ones. This gives the clue to the argument that, if man believes he has some continuity with the power source (as in the first categories of the magical and transcendent systems), then he will invest ordered forms with sacred functions in order to try and influence the power source. This is to say that *the sacred function is imposed on an otherwise neutral form (explicit)*. On the other hand, if man believes he has no continuity with the power source (as in the second categories in the magical and transcendent systems), then the only forms of the dance which will take man out of himself, or into another state of consciousness where he may open himself to this power source are ecstatic forms. *There is a direct relationship between form and function here (implicit)*.

4. Conclusion:

Anyone attempting a comprehensive answer to the question "when is the dance sacred"?, needs, therefore, to consider a number of variables including: (i) the dance-in-itself, (ii) factors which influence the form and function of dance, (iii) the concept of sacredness itself. A scientific consideration of these variables would involve: 1) placing the dance in a conceptual system, 2) locating the locus of power in that particular system, 3) examining the nature of this locus, e.g., good/bad/ambivalent/neutral, 4) considering the forms of the dance which issue from or are directed towards this locus, 5) distinguishing whether the identifiable sacred functions are implicit or explicit (i.e. whether they are accomplished as a result of the nature of the dance, or are given to it by man as meaning-maker). Finally, what is the point of such a radical consideration of this question? It should remove much of the romantic and woolly thinking which surrounds the dance, and demonstrate its real scope for use in fulfilling a sacred function within any particular system. Within the Christian Church, for example, such a consideration is needed, if the place of dance in liturgy and church life, generally, is to be understood and its further scope and use explored.