

# Traditional Dance and the Healing Power of the Goddess

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In my article “Meine Initiation in die Welt der Frauentänze” I wrote about the ‘flow of energy’ which enables us to feel replenished rather than depleted, no matter how long we dance. This energy is a tangible phenomenon, a life force which our dancing ‘pumps’ from the earth like water, creating a perceptible heat even when our movements are small<sup>1</sup>. I believe this energy is fundamentally a healing power; that its importance as a phenomenon accessible through dance dates back to Neolithic times; and that it still manifests meaningfully in our dancing circles today.

Patterns traced on the ground in traditional Balkan and Near Eastern dance are the same symbols that feature in the costumes worn for dancing, namely the spiral, zigzag, circle, snake, cross, crescent and Tree of Life, itself an encoded symbol for the mother goddess once openly revered in the same geographical area where these folk dances still survive. These designs also appear in carpets, metalwork, woodcarving, pottery, breadmaking and other crafts. Rooted in the oldest artefacts found in Eastern Europe and the Near East<sup>2</sup>, these folk arts document the continuity of a symbolic language they share with folk dance, which I suggest indicates that the dances themselves may be equally old<sup>3</sup>.

Balkan women’s folk dress invariably features motifs in repeating patterns, mirroring those of the simple dances which are the most widespread and the most ancient. People believed that specific designs had the power to create health and protect the wearer from evil influences<sup>4</sup>. A common folk dress motif is the dancing goddess, a generic totem of fertility and benevolence, in the form of a faceless female figure radiant with vital energy. Goddess figures in both textile and terracotta lack detailed facial characteristics, not through any lack of technical ability on the part of the artisans, but because they aim to illustrate a universal archetype rather than portray the individual features of a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Shannon, “Meine Initiation in die Welt der Frauentänze”, Kreise Ziehen Heft 4/03

<sup>2</sup> Marija Gimbutas, The Language of the Goddess, 1989 HarperSanFrancisco.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Shannon, “Dances of the Great Mother: Three-measure Dances and the Tree of Life”, 2003, [dance.demon.co.uk](http://dance.demon.co.uk)

<sup>4</sup> Linda Welters, Folk Dress in Europe and Anatolia: Beliefs About Protection and Fertility, 1999 Berg, Oxford.

woman<sup>5</sup>.

The 19th century Razgrad apron<sup>6</sup> depicts a line of dancing goddesses with little lines streaming out from their heads. The energy lines could be an illustration of sound waves: singing has been associated with both dance and healing since ancient times, and is widely used in contemporary dance and ritual circles. A happy smile is another unmistakable expression of radiance emanating from the head: the joy of dance was an essential counterpoint to the hard work of village life. The best dancers were accorded high status even if they were poor, since the positive energy their skill invoked and expressed was believed to benefit the whole community<sup>7</sup>. Scientists today confirm what our own experience tells us, that joy and laughter can help us heal and keep us healthy.

Goddess figures often appear with hands upraised, in a gesture of both blessing and invocation, giving and receiving. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Mary – the most visible present-day incarnation of the Great Goddess – is frequently portrayed in this pose. Dancers take the same position in the oldest improvisational ritual dances, such as the Greek *karsilamás* and the Bulgarian *râchenitsa*, which both require and generate a great deal of energy. Dance postures such as this one may serve to identify the dancer with the archetype of the goddess and make her a medium for the benevolent forces the goddess represents<sup>8</sup>.

Dancers in a circle wearing identical costumes and adhering to regional dance style, both of which impose similar movement qualities on everyone in the circle, resemble the linked dancing goddesses woven into women's ceremonial costumes. Embodying a unity which transcends personality, the dancers unconsciously synchronise body rhythms and brain waves, creating a healing container on the cellular level in the circle of the dance. This can happen in our circles too, even without the unifying influence of folk dress, as dance style and movement synchrony alone can produce trancelike healing states<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Kelly, Goddess Embroideries of the Balkan Lands and the Greek Islands, 1999 Studiobooks, Mclean, New York.

<sup>6</sup> Kreise Ziehen, Heft 4/03, Seite 4

<sup>7</sup> Martha Forsyth and Linka Gekova Gergova, Listen, Daughter, and Remember Well..., 1996 St Kliment Ohridski University Press, Sofia.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Shannon, The Dance of Life, 2002, exhibition text.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Shannon, "Patterns of Healing, Holding and Wholing: Some Therapeutic Uses of Folk Dance", 1989 Roehampton Institute, London.

Elaborate bridal headdresses also align the wearer with the archetype of the goddess. Throughout the Balkans, young maidens entering womanhood wore special costumes and radiant headdresses [Photo 1] as they joined the village dance for the first time<sup>10</sup>. The dancers thus resemble the sun-headed goddesses embroidered on their ritual clothing, like this one on a saja pocket from Bulgaria [Photo 2]. Caroline Myss, author of many bestselling books on healing, has channeled an almost identical image<sup>11</sup> to illustrate the life force as it flows into the personal energy field of the human body. She describes this cosmic energy as the source of healing power and divine guidance, which enables us to fulfill our soul's purpose as a wholly realised human being<sup>12</sup>.

On the wedding day, the bride's face is veiled, so that her own identity is completely subsumed to the archetype of the goddess. In her role as initiate on the threshold between the worlds, the bride embodies all that the goddess represents – the source of life, health, healing and all things good – for the benefit of the entire community. In our contemporary circles, dance can help us experience this same archetype of vitality. As we align ourselves with a universal energy of healing, we are enabled to transcend the limitations of our own 'biography and biology'<sup>13</sup> and reconnect with the original template of our full potential. Any woman can open through these ancient danced gestures of invocation: we all have the capacity to attune to the cosmic vibration of the divine feminine, and to transmit our embodiment of this sacred energy as a healing force into our lives and into our world.

Photo Captions:

[Photo 1: Girls wearing radiant bridal headdresses, Kosmach, Ukraine. Photo: Mary Kelly]

[Photo 2: Sun-headed winged goddess on a saja (overdress) from Pernik, Bulgaria. Photo: Mary Kelly]

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<sup>10</sup> Mercia MacDermott, Bulgarian Folk Customs, 1998 Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

<sup>11</sup> This image can be viewed on the website [www.myss.com](http://www.myss.com)  
Dieses Bild kann auf der Website [www.myss.com](http://www.myss.com) gefunden werden.

<sup>12</sup> Caroline Myss, Sacred Contracts: Awakening Your Divine Potential, 2001 Bantam Books, New York.

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Myss, Anatomy of the Spirit, 1996 Bantam Books, New York.