

The Expression of Life Energy in Traditional Women's Dances

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The definition of 'express' is literally to 'press out.' Many years ago, my mentor Zuleikha told me 'Dancing is pressing energy out through every cell of the body, in all directions, all the time'. This energy can't be our own energy; it must have a sustainable source. In circle dance, we are connected with that source when we feel more energised than depleted by our participation in the dance, and this comes through our connection with earth and sky and sacred nature. This experience and expression of an energy greater than ourselves is, I believe, one of the great secrets at the heart of traditional women's dances.

The mystery of how the dance sustains the dancers is what enabled circle dancing to survive as an integral part of traditional life in Eastern Europe and the Near East, where women worked hard and didn't have energy to fritter away. In these cultures, the social obligation to dance ensured a society where everyone could be regularly nourished by an experience of transcendent life energy and joy. This in turn was believed to benefit the whole community.

The benevolent life energy which can be experienced and expressed in the body is tangible and real. It has been known and named in every ancient tradition – chi, ki, shakti – and can be scientifically measured and recorded. Folk art and archaeology offer countless illustrations of it. Both ancient goddess images and the ubiquitous female figures embroidered on women's festive costumes show radiant energy lines streaming – 'pressing out' – from the head and face. Similarly, the dancing women themselves wear headdresses incorporating sequins, fringes, flowers, jewelry, and other adornments. These shining, radiant crowns resemble the quintessential source of life energy, the sun, and serve as both a template for, and an expression of, the state of inner shining which the circle dance aims to ignite.

This energy is a sacred energy; this shining is the sign of the goddess. The radiant-headed goddesses in cloth or clay do not represent personal portraits of individual women: rather, they are transpersonal illustrations of an archetypal image which each dancer is invited to enter, to embody and to express. The most elaborate headdresses are worn by brides and young women crossing the threshold of puberty, like the Bulgarian *lazarki*. Women in these liminal states were considered sacred, and could bestow blessings on the village, the animals and the grain. Identically dressed and crowned with radiant headdresses, they temporarily take on the appearance of the goddess as well as her powers.

The energy lines in archaeology and folk art may represent heat or healing, sound or song, or the joyful smiles that radiate from the faces of the dancers. They may resemble wind or water, leaves and roots, fruits and seeds. These and other images from nature also appear in traditional dance, for instance in the Armenian women's lyrical dance style, with its precise and sophisticated repertoire of animal, vegetal and elemental gestures. Such movements, together

with rhythm and melody, also serve to bring the blessings of the natural world into the human community. This was exactly the work of the shamans of old, and in fact I believe these dances have their roots in Central Asian shamanistic traditions going back thousands of years.

Modern times have seen these traditions change, fade and vanish in many of the places where the dance circles once thrived. However, as the dances wane in their countries of origin, so they wax in the countless circles of contemporary women all over the world who are choosing women's ritual dances as their own embodied spiritual practice. Whoever we are, however we dress, the ancient patterns of steps and movements can connect us to the source of cosmic energy. All that is required is that we dance them faithfully, accurately, respectfully, with an open mind and open heart. The degree of consciousness with which we dance determines the degree and intensity of our expression – our 'pressing out' – of the life force which is the essential goddess nature. We too have the opportunity to transcend the limitations of our individual identity, to channel this sacred energy for the benefit of ourselves and our circle, and to consciously take our place in the lineage of dancing women.

'To express' is also 'to squeeze out juice': when we reconnect our bodies with the joyful source of all life, and claim our participation in this cosmic energy as our birthright, we can finally free our most juicy, lively and vital selves, our magic, creativity, enthusiasm, and joy. As we experience and express this energy in dance, we feel a light shining out in all directions, exactly as Zuleikha described. Radiantly beautiful and vibrantly alive, we are the living priestesses of the ancient dancing goddess, able both to honour the memory of those who came before, and to light the way for those we hope will follow.

Illustrations:

['Razgrad apron.jpg'] Embroidered radiant-headed dancing goddesses on apron, Razgrad, Bulgaria, 19th C. In Bulgarian National Museum of Ethnography, Sofia. Photo: Laura Shannon.

['Pernik saja.jpg'] Sun-headed winged goddess on a saja (overdress) from Pernik, Bulgaria, 20th C. Photo: Mary Kelly

['Ukrainian girls.jpg'] Girls wearing radiant headdresses, Kosmach, Ukraine. Photo: Mary Kelly

['Vase Goddess scarf.jpg']. Abstract goddess with radiant flower / head, scarf end, Asia Minor, 19th C. Photo: Laura Shannon

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