

Many of us find that traditional circle dances open a window to a world which we somehow recognise and remember, even as we enter for the first time. Dancing in circles, we may feel a joyous awe for life and great gladness for our part in it, as though we are joining in something akin to worship, becoming part of something greater than ourselves. We feel we are coming home.

Originally, dance always served as a collective expression of reverence and gratitude: for the life force and the miracle of the human body, for natural and agricultural cycles, and especially for the female principle as the source of life. This healthy, danced worldview can be witnessed in many parts of our planet, but in Europe it can be hard to find. In Bulgaria, however, there's a rich stream of woman-positive, goddess-celebrating culture which I believe goes straight back to the very first human communities of Europe, and which we recognise when we meet it in the dance.

I have come to view traditional Bulgarian (and other) folk dance as an ancient language, secretly speaking the life-affirming truths of this worldview, over and over as we dance. We can 'read' the same truths in related forms of folk art such as the embroidered clothing people wore when they were dancing, and the songs women sang while they embroidered that clothing. Similar signs and symbols are repeated on the patterned housewares people used in day-to-day living, and in the eternal, ephemeral forms of ceremonial foods: ritual loaves of bread embedded with coloured eggs, studded with burning candles, or adorned with evergreen box sprigs representing the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life is the central symbol of this hidden language, representing the harmonious balance of unity and duality, and the human body as bridge between the sacred realms of earth and sky. Above all, the Tree of Life is deeply identified with the ancient mother goddess formerly worshipped throughout Old Europe, and indeed everywhere where circle dances once flourished or still survive.

For years I prowled around museums and books and dusty Eastern European villages in pursuit of these overt and covert relationships between music, dance, costume and custom. It all came to life for me in glorious colour on my first visit to the Koprivshitsa Festival in Bulgaria, in 1991. Once every five years, dancers from all over the country converge on high meadows above the architecturally stunning Ottoman town of Koprivshitsa, for a three-day feast of music, song and dance as people used to know it.

The Koprivshitsa Festival is restricted to amateur groups, who still dance the old dances from the villages. Many of the Bulgarian dances which have spread through the folk dance world are complicated, athletic choreographies created by professional ensembles. However, the original dances of the Bulgarian folk tend to follow a simple sequence of three, four or five measures, repeated hypnotically with few variations: *pravo horo* and its *trakijsko* and *rodopsko* forms; *lesnoto*, *devetorka*, *pajdushka*, *rachenitsa*, and many more. I have come to see the three-measure pattern, the oldest and most widespread of all traditional folk dance forms, as a danced metaphor for the Tree of Life, and thus for the Mother Goddess. These are the dances which come alive again in Koprivshitsa.

Not only are the Koprivshitsa performers singing the old songs and dancing the old dances, they are walking around all day long wearing the old costumes: not harsh

and lifeless factory-made copies, but heirloom costumes specific to their village and passed down through generations. Each one seems quietly luminous with rich vegetable dyes, and vibrant with thousands of hours of handiwork steeped in the songs and dances of the *sedanki*, or work parties, where they were made. The Tree of Life figures heavily in the embroidered ornamentation, sometimes elaborate, sometimes plain; sometimes disguised as flowers; sometimes unmistakably the Goddess with upraised hands, radiant heads, embroidered energy lines shining out like the rays of the sun. These exquisite miniature images reflect the beauty of the women who wear the costumes, graceful as trees, whose radiant headdresses turn them into sun-headed goddesses themselves.

To see these quiet yet energising dances performed by a crescent or circle of women in identical costume – and yes, sometimes to join in – is to gain an understanding about dance, and style, and continuity, that I believe cannot be transmitted in any other way. A certain style is imposed on those dancing together in costume, as some movements are naturally facilitated and others restricted. This enables the dancers to synchronise their movements and transcend their individual personae, both in their own felt experience and in the eyes of the watching community. In this way, the women come to literally embody the living goddess in their dance.

In traditional Bulgaria, women were the keepers of custom and the power places of hearth, home, farm and garden. Cultural conservatives, they carefully tended streams of song, dance and ritual largely unchanged from generation to generation, going back hundreds or even thousands of years, preserving living remnants of an ancient fabric which brought strands from all aspects of life into its weave. One festival stage set deep in the woods is devoted to reenactments of rituals from weddings and funerals, planting and harvest, and special magical spells such as that of the *peperuda* – butterfly – where a young girl will dance, covered from head to toe in fresh green leaves, to end a drought and bring rain.

Men also have an honoured place in the ancient Bulgarian worldview, and Koprivshitsa is one of the best places to witness what is left of their disappearing ritual dance traditions. The *koledari*, singers of powerful pagan blessing songs at Christmas, wear hats garlanded with sprigs of box and strings of popcorn, and dance a hypnotic *buenets* in spurred boots that create an unearthly jingling accompaniment to their raucous singing. The *koledari* can be casually encountered on the hills of the festival site or in the streets of Koprivshitsa town, as can numerous groups of *kukeri*, male mummers dressed in women's clothing for power and harnessed with rows of enormous cowbells which create a thrilling and unforgettable din.

Most of the dancers at the Koprivshitsa festival are ordinary men and women, born before WWII, who learned the old ways from parents and grandparents who believed their way of life would go on forever, as it always had. Sadly, as the years pass, there are fewer and fewer older ones dancing. However, when I visited Koprivshitsa in 2001, the last time the festival took place, I saw many more younger people, being taught by the elders, and this gives me hope that the underground stream of the living goddess will find a way to survive, to surface, to allow all us thirsty wanderers to drink deeply at the source.

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In Neolithic times, the divine feminine principle was revered in the form of the

Great Goddess throughout Europe and the Near East, Central Asia, North Africa and the Mediterranean Fertile Crescent - everywhere circle dances originally thrived. The enduring importance of this belief can be seen in the goddess symbols still given pride of place in dance, textiles and other folk arts from this same geographical area.

Goddess worship in Bulgaria was first recorded by Greek historians Herodotus and Aristophanes over 2500 years ago. Over time, earth goddesses such as Bendida and Rodopa merged with Greek Demeter and Cybele and eventually with Mary, Mother of God. The Orthodox church allowed Christian customs to coexist with pre-Christian practices, and wise women were not persecuted or burned as witches as they were in northern and western Europe. This, I believe, is the key reason why goddess-oriented folklore is still alive in Bulgaria.

Women's agricultural, healing and magical rituals were always accompanied by song and dance. Both mystical and practical, they mediated seasonal changes and all aspects of life, including celebration and joy, sexuality and modesty, conflict and loss. This witnessing of the full range of human experience reminds me of the way young children look to their parents to confirm and validate all their emotional states, and thus their essential wholeness. In this way, I see the body of folklore actually serving as the Mother Goddess, providing a kind of 'great mothering' through dance, song and ritual.

Astonishingly, these rituals remained essentially unchanged from mediaeval times until WW2. Bulgaria's position as a remote backwater of the Ottoman empire from the late 14th century onwards meant that 500 years of Western European cultural and industrial development completely bypassed the land-based peasant society, and ancient customs and beliefs survived intact. The post-war communist government continued to restrict access to Westernising influences, and supported folk music and dance considered to be authentically 'Bulgarian' and ideologically 'pure', which preserved certain streams of tradition while excluding others. In the free market era, state support for professional folk ensembles has vanished, but amateur groups continue in remote rural areas, and festivals like Koprivshtitsa still offer a taste of village culture as it once was.

The rapid pace of economic and social change in modern Bulgaria means the old ways are now seriously endangered. This saddens me deeply. To me the oldest, simplest dances are like living beings, who provide a unique sense of continuity and connection with our ancestors in the human family. Like wise elders who become more animated in the presence of those who want to hear their stories, my sense is that they are willing, even eager to incarnate in our circles. To help them survive, we need only listen.

To learn and transmit dances accurately, it's helpful to study with several teachers, dance with Bulgarians (or in Bulgaria!), and do all we can to understand style, background, and cultural context. I feel we have an obligation to pass them on as faithfully as possible, since everything about the dances is there for a reason – even if we don't necessarily understand it – and if we change them now, it may be forever. Traditional dances are a non-renewable resource in limited supply. This, too, has always been the message of the Goddess, first and foremost a deity of Nature: to live sustainably and preserve the web of life of which we are temporary custodians.

Today, when oceans, air, forests, and every aspect of this delicate web is under

threat, the simple joy of dancing in circles can offer an instant antidote to feelings of powerlessness and despair. Whether we are preserving traditional forms or creating modern choreographies, the circle manifests unity, community, and mutual support, just as it always has. With every step on the ground, we follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before, and lay down the trail for those who will come after.

In our time, we can translate the message of the goddess into practical action, for instance by recycling, living lightly, and being mindful of the consequences of our actions. On a deeper level, I feel her invitation - and challenge - is to go as deeply into personal and collective transformation as we dare. The power of symbols is not merely a mental construct, but is based on experience of their actual effectiveness. The circle is both a symbol and a catalyst for unity; the Tree of Life, a sign of synthesis resolving the tension between opposing forces. These concepts are easy to speak of, but difficult to accomplish.

In Bulgaria, ritual dancing was a frequent social *requirement* (the mother goddess was strict!). The obligation to stay in the circle with both friends and foes provided an incentive and an opportunity to work through the inevitable difficulties and misunderstandings of life in a small community. In our circles, too, it's natural for conflict to arise. How we choose to respond is a chance to 'be the change we wish to see in the world', to quote Gandhi. Do we really believe our circle dance rhetoric of peace, harmony, love and understanding? Can we put it into practice? If we could let this principle guide us in our interactions, and (for example) trust that at any given dance event we would never hear an unkind word spoken of an absent friend - we might know, then, that the underlying wisdom of the mother goddess has truly taken root, and the survival of Her message is no longer endangered.

This theme of the Goddess as Tree of Life inspires me to close with these thoughts from Wangari Maathai: "Cultural revival might be the only thing that stands between the conservation or destruction of the environment, the only way to perpetuate the knowledge and wisdom inherited from the past, necessary for the survival of future generations. A new attitude toward nature provides space for a new attitude toward culture and the role it plays in sustainable development: an attitude based on a new understanding - that self-identity, self-respect, morality and spirituality play a major role in the life of a community and its capacity to take steps that benefit it and ensure its survival."

When Dr Maathai won the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize (for women's reforestation projects in Kenya), some commentators had trouble accepting that tree planting could have anything to do with peace. Similarly, some people may not see how circle dancing can have anything to do with politics, but I say this: For the sake of future generations, we must conserve our fragile environment, both on the earth and among ourselves. The danced teachings of the goddess can lovingly help us understand our part in this interdependent world and our responsibility for ensuring its continuity. By speaking this simple *yes!* to life in our cynical and nihilistic age, and choosing conservation rather than destruction, circle dance is indeed a potent political act.

*Selected References:* Anne Llewellyn Barstow, [Witchcraze](#); Marija Gimbutas, [The Language of the Goddess](#); Martha Forsyth, [Listen, Daughter, and Remember Well](#); Mary Kelly, [Goddess Embroideries of the Balkan Lands and the Greek Islands](#); Mercia MacDermott, [Bulgarian Folk Customs](#); Wangari Maathai (Resurgence, Jan / Feb 2005); Tim Rice, [May It Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian Music](#)