

# A history of dance through the ages



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## **Dance and communications**

How dancers have related and communicated with their environment throughout time. Please write about the change of dance and communications using examples of primitive and tribal communities, and throughout biblical societies, to the present day – how this form of spiritual and natural form of communication with a connection to the natural environment and (the divine) has been lost due to Industrialisation and become a commercial form of communication. (Add aspects of dance as a healing method and dance and communications).

### **ABSTRACT**

This project carries out an investigation on how dancers have related and communicated with the environment throughout time. The importance of dance in religious and magical gatherings is probably older than its use for recreation and entertainment. There is little doubt in many scholars mind that for the primitive man, dance was integrated in everyday activity expressing every kind of conceivable emotion; from the hunter dancing around his prey, to the prospect of war against another tribe and to the ritual ceremonies performed in dedication to the Gods.

It was only as a result of when more difficult social and economic structure; (invasions and urbanisation) did dance become commercialised as a source of entertainment.

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

### **1. 1 Project Aims**

History shows that dance was used as an expression of how our ancestors would communicate with the divine. It was used as a fundamental part of life in healing, worship, family and connection to the natural environment. The use of dance in religious and magical gatherings is probably older than its use for recreation and entertainment. Research has shown through ancient archaeological findings how dance was an essential part of everyday life. It was only when industrialisation and urbanisation emerged did it now become a commercial form of communication.

The aim of this project is to investigate how dance was used as a method of communication throughout biblical societies, to this present day using primitive and tribal communities as examples. This project explores the history of dance from ancient to modern and how dance has changed dramatically due to industrialisation, highlighting whether any of these tribal dances are still in existence today, died or have been transformed with society

## 1. 2 Objectives

- Introduction to the meaning of dance in history and how it has changed through modernisation. Look into ancient tribal societies and how they lived their lives.
- A look into biblical societies, how dancing was used as an expression of joy, thanksgiving and enhancing their relationship with the divine.
- Provide information on how primitive and tribal communities used dance as a spiritual method to connect with the natural environment.
- The foundation of modern dance and whether any of it has derived from old tribal sacred dance that related to the communication of the divine.
- How the natural form of dance used for communicating with the natural environment has been lost due to industrialisation becoming a commercial form of communication
- Finally, a conclusion of whether dance in its natural form still exists in some parts of the world and how its being preserved through commercialisation,

## CHAPTER 2: HISTORY OF DANCE

### 2. 1 Dance

Dance can be described as artistic form of non communication or to move in a graceful or rhythmical way. Its origins are lost in prehistoric times, but, from the study of many primitive tribes and ancient cultures, both men and women danced as a form of spiritual release intertwining the environment and the divine.

History shows that there are two types of dances that evolved as cultures developed; Social dance and spiritual dance. Social dances are those used on occasions that celebrated birth and commemorated deaths whilst magical or religious dances were used as an active worship to communicate with the Gods as well as to cure the sick. In religious dance, the medicine men of primitive cultures were believed to have powers that invoked the assistance of a God and were both feared, respected and were considered by many to be the first choreographers, or composers of formal dances.

## **2. 2. Biblical dance**

The bible is known as the sacred writings of the Christian religion which tells the faith and history of ancient Israel. It dates back many centuries ago and is believed to be the eldest book that dictates how the first human beings from this world lived their lives.

In this book, dance is said to play a prominent role in communication and the expression of emotions to the divine. The bible was originally written in Hebrew, Greek and some bits of Aramaic language which resembles Hebrew. Some of the original Hebrew words in the Old Testament were *kheel* or *khool* meaning to twist or writhe, *raw-kad* meaning to jump or stamp and *kaw-rar* meaning to whirl. In the New Testament, the Greek term *kheh-om-ahee* means a circular motion. Like other historic religions, dancing was used to communicate with the divine

Many biblical passages show how the people of Israel danced as expressions of happiness, gratitude, and praise for the higher being:

- Ladies dancing in the vineyard to celebrate the yearly festival – Judges 21: 21-23
- Jephthah's daughter dancing and playing the tambourine – judges -11: 34
- Miriam led dancing and singing and praise to the lord – Exodus 15: 20-21
- David danced before the ark of the lord to honour the Lord...
- King David dancing and jumping around in his sacred dance – 2 Samuel 6: 14-23

The bible emphasises dancing only to be used as a religious rite that was to be practiced for joyful occasions, national feasts and victorious battles. Males and females usually danced separately, not as form of courtship which is now seen in the modern society. Any form of dance not used for the glorification of the high being was regarded sinful. The only records in the bible of dancing for social entertainment were those of ungodly families who spent their time in luxury who's end was believed to eventually come to a sudden destruction ( Job 11: 11-13); and the dancing of Herodians which led to the murder of John the Baptist. (Matthew 14: 11) Hebrew words that have meanings related to physical movement were translated into English as rejoice.

Every instance of dancing in the bible that was acceptable was done in worship and in praise to the God of Israel. It was a way to express the emotions and keep in contact with the divine one.

### **2.3 Ancient Egypt**

Ancient Egypt was the birth place of one of the world's first civilisations. This advanced culture rose 5, 000 years ago. It thrived for over 2, 000 years and so became one of the longest lasting civilizations in history.

Dance was an essential part in ancient Egyptian culture. According to Wendy Burk, [1] it evolved from the simple rituals used by hunters to find their prey. Performing the dances was believed to help in later hunts. A leader, called a priest-dancer, was responsible for seeing that the dances were performed correctly so that the hunt would be successful.

Eventually these dances were separated from their ritual and became an art of their own. This development paralleled the emergence of Osiris as Egyptian's most important God. He was the symbol of a more developed civilisation on Earth, and belief in him guaranteed everlasting life. Dance was a crucial element in the festivals held for Osiris. These occurred throughout the year—in the summer, for instance, when the river Nile began to rise and the corn was ripening, and in the fall on All souls night—the ancient ancestor of Halloween. Egyptian art shows that Men and women never danced together, and the most common scenes depict groups of female dancers were often performing in pairs.

Dancing within the ancient Egyptian culture could be spontaneous as were orchestrated for religious festivals:

*“ All the people of all the dwellings of the court heard (of the coronation of Hatshepsut); they came, their mouths rejoicing, they proclaimed (it) beyond everything, dwelling on dwelling therein was announcing (it) in his name;*



*soldiers on soldiers [...], they leaped and they danced for the double joy in their hearts."*

James Henry Breasted *Ancient Records of Egypt* , Part Two, § 238

As true in most primitive cultures, music was a part of these celebrations but not as important as the dancing itself. Egyptians had developed stringed, wind and percussion instruments as well as different sorts of whistle and harms in order to communicate with their Gods.

## **2. 4 Ancient Greek mythology**

Research shows that dance was used by the Greeks to honour their Gods and therefore used it for religious, fellowship and worshiping ceremonies. They believed the Gods offered this gift to some selected morals only who in return taught the dancing to their fellow men. The following exerts that talks about the origins of dance comes from H. B. Cothherhills book on Ancient Greece who's extensive research talks about the origins of dance in ancient Greece.

*" Every fifth year the birth of the twin deities was celebrated with magnificence, amidst a great concourse, vividly described in the ancient hymn to Apollo: ' hither gather the long-robed Ionians with their children and chaste wives. They wrestle, they dance they sing in memory of the God. He who saw them would say they were immortal and ageless, so much grace and charm... "*

Ancient Greece: A sketch of its Art, Literature and philosophy

Book by H. B Cotterill, Goethe, Milton, Virgil; Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913

In the classic Greek song, Apollo, another one of the Gods who is son to Zeus is regarded as the dancer. Zeus is regarded as the the God of medicine, music and poetry. In a Greek line Zeus himself is represented as dancing. In an ancient province in Greece known as Sparta, Apollo was worshipped through the Gymnopaedia festivals and celebrations. They were performed by young boys, mature men and old men who focused on performing in a very dignified manner.

As well as for religious ceremonies, dance was also used for education. It was thought to promote physical health and encourage education positively. Aristotle, a famous philosopher in Greek history, born in Greece (384-322) B. C, studied philosophy, taught that education should be a blend of music and gymnastic training in order to improve moral training. Socrates who also is an ancient philosopher in Greece said that dance should be taught even more widely than it already was. He said that those honouring the gods most beautifully in dance were those who were the best in war; he claimed that to sing and dance well was to be well educated. As with the Jewish festivals described in the bible, Greek dances were not based on the relationship between men and woman but were either performed either by males or by the females.

## **2. 5 The Christian era**

As the Christian faith grew, along came dramatic rituals to be used for prayer. It came along with the Latin mass were dance was included along

with the music and drama. Performed were what was known as miracle plays, mystery plays and morality play that taught the Church's lesson in a theatrical manner. It became a form of entertainment rather than just part of a ritual practice. Both dance and song were used to communicate and express a full range of emotions.

Other dances that evolved in the era were the sword dances that were performed in Germany, Scotland and Western Europe. This was most likely due to the Vikings. Sword dances link the swords to form a pattern or lock and in some dances a man enacts a ritual beheading.

## **2. 6 Oriental dancing**

In various parts of Asia, traditions of dance date back to many thousands of years. Most theatrical dance forms of Asia were performed originally as parts of religious worship. Many folk dances also developed in Asia, but modern social dances reflect western influences. In some Asian dances, slight movements of the upper body, especially facial expressions and hand gestures communicate the message of dance. Many dances describe through gesture a historical event, a legend or a myth.

One particular dance in the Hindu religion that showed expression of spirituality and deep commitment to the environment is known as the Bharata Natayam. This dance was originally performed in the temples of India and combines rhythmically complicated dancing with Hindu legends told in a song.

The dance has been described:

*"...an offering of one self to the divine used by the devotee to connect with the supreme"*

Vasanthi Srinivasan: Teacher of the Bharata Natayam

This particular type of dance dates back to second century AD., and was performed by young women who were offered to the Gods of the temple. According to Vasanthi Srinivasan, this type of dance fell into dispute with Islamic law which came about as invasions from the Muslim community who outlawed it. The Bharata Natayam was originally used to pay homage to the Gods but as a result of invasions, it now emerged as a state art form and has never left the hearts and minds of the Hindu people. [2]

Despite the modernisation of the Bharata Natayam, the dance still shows its dedication and honour to the natural environment and divine in its movement.

*" Before the dance starts, the earth on which it is to be performed is sanctified. And since dance is like trampling on the earth, the dancer asks permission of the mother earth to trample on her. In this way, the dance bears similarities to other native and indigenous dances. The dancer dances in her bare feet out of respect for mother earth. The Bharata Natayam is a narrative type of dance. The dancer uses hand and body gestures put to music to tell a story. The stories are traditional ones based on nature and human emotion. There are two primary texts from which the stories are drawn: the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Mahabharata is about two fighting cousins, similar to the Greek Iliad. The one who brings about resolution is the Lord Krishna. The Gita, a special chapter in the*

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*Mahabharata representing the song of the Lord, is an elaboration of a moral code."*

### **Mei-Lin Stichbury**

Dance in the Hindu scriptures show how the manifestation of the whole universe was brought into existence by the dance of the supreme dance Nataraja. It is part of a sacred temple ritual where they pay homage to the divine. The temple dance had now evolved to what is known as the Hindu classical dance however as shown in the Bharata Natayam, still preserves many ritualistic ideology of Hindu worship.

### **China**

The ' Sun Chia Chai' one of the first most significant forms of Dance found in ancient China. Archaeological findings show pictures of dancers that were in the middle of a mimetic process connected to their hunting. Early writings show how dancing was incorporated within every aspect of Chinese culture since the beginning of civilization.

As described by Yaron Moargolin, many can still feel the spirit of the ancient dances.

*In those, the dancers describe the course of the stars in the sky and bring the idea of heaven. In the dance known as the " yangoo" we can see the great movements of the dancer's hands and legs which express the admiration to the universe. Those mimetic expressions has developed during the passing years and become an important part of everyday life in china. The dance was inspired by everyday relations between the regular Chinese*

*man and his emperor, his friends or his body. It became very physical and after a while the classic dance came out of this. Until now, we saw only the happiness and joy in the ancient dances, but there were also bad feelings as fear and evil, which were expressed through dances. It was a war inspiration.*

<http://www.israeldance.co.il/dance>

By Yaron Margolin

Ancient paintings and pottery show that there are believed to have been two types of dances that emerged, one being the military dance, this dance is highlighted with dancers holding their sticks full of feathers. There were also amour, flags, hunting and fishing equipments that were used in the dance. The second kind of dance was the religious dance to communicate with the earthly surroundings and to honour the environment. These worship dances were believed to have been developed through hunting. [3]

## **2. 5 Ancient Belly Dancing**

Belly dancing is a very ancient form of dancing. It retains its connections to the cycles of nature, the celebrations of fertility and light. It started out just as the many other historic dances began, a religious rite, it then evolved into folk art and through modernisation turned into a form of lascivious and entertainment. Belly dance is identified by swaying hips, undulating torso and articulated isolations employed in a range of dynamic and emotional expressions. The focus is on isolated movements of individual parts of the body with little notice given to footsteps.

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During its history, belly dancing was performed as a separate dance between the sexes. To them, women were the goddesses who created the mystery of life through their bodies. The rolling of the stomach imitates birthing contractions and the kneeling of the floor is similar to how women of more earthly, primitive cultures would squat to give birth rather than lying on their backs in a hospital bed [4]

## **2. 7 Evaluation of Ancient Dance**

Dancing was sacred to the people who performed these acts. It was mainly used in worship rites. and served as a meditating force between people and the world of Gods. Prehistoric people made up religious dancing to gain favour of their Gods. In many of these cultures, dancing provided one of the most effective and personal methods of communication. It was used to express feelings such as joy, anger or happiness without saying a word

## **CHAPTER 3: TRIBAL DANCE**

A tribe can be described as a unit of socio-political organisation consisting of a number of families, clans or other groups who share a common ancestry and culture and among whom leadership is typically formalized or neither permanent. For many tribes, dancing was very much their way of life, where each tribe has its own distinctive dance traditions that were interwoven with life. In some secret societies in Africa, a special initiation dance is known only to its members. When new members learn the dance, it represents their acceptance into the group.

This chapter explores how tribes used dancing as an effective way of communication and whether any of these tribes still exist in our society

today or have been lost due to the forces of industrialisation and modernisation.

### **3. 1 Kerala**

Kerala is now known as a popular holiday resort state in India, however early archaeologist findings show that the first citizens of Kerala were hunter-gathers. These people still inhabit the mountains of southern Indians today. The next race of people in Kerala is believed to be the Austriches. The Austric people of Kerala are of the same stock as the present-day Australian Aborigines. They were the people who laid the foundation of Indian civilizations. They also introduced snake-worship in Kerala. Traces of such worship and ancient rites have been found among the Aboriginal tribes of Australia. Austric features can still be seen fairly and clearly among the people of Kerala today

The tribal inhabitants of Kerala are believed to be about two hundred thousand years old. There are roughly about 35 different types of tribal chiefs among them. Centuries have failed to change them completely. They have been described as

*“ A unique example of communities in isolated existence, still preserving their life, customs and manners almost untarnished by the advancing waves of urban civilization. Though adapted to different dialects and customs, their artistic expression evidently reflects the distinct, secluded and primitive social structure and nature of people and it still survives as virile as state as ever in the tribal hamlets of the hilly tracts.”*

<http://www.kalakeralam.com/visual/tribaldance00.htm>

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The tribes of Kerala have its own distinct dance traditions, like all tribal arts the dancing is the most direct expression of the innermost spirit. One type of ritual dance performed by is known as the Gadhika. The performance can be done as a ritual for having the safe delivery of a child. It begins with the principle performer invoking Lord Shiva for his help to cure the patients. Central to the belief is that a person falls sick when the Gods are angry. The participants of the dance involve both sexes whose function is to welcome both the Gods and Goddesses.

### **3. 2 Bangladesh tribal dance**

Tribal dance in Bangladesh regions were based on their customs and beliefs. Before they will go on a hunt, hunters would draw pictures of their prey and dance in a body imitating a hunt. The hunter for example will dance around his prey and even at times donned the fur of his prey. With the evolution of society, human activities have undergone many changes resulting in different dance styles. Tribes in Bangladesh that still exist include the Santals, Oraons, Murongs and Chakmas. They live in the hilly regions of Bangladesh and although some changes have taken place in the livelihood and religious beliefs they still tend to follow their ancestors in various religious and cultural festivals.

The Garos tribe perform their dance through what is known as a *Nokma*, [5] which is pleasing to the leader of the community. The dance is intended to express joy. A dance known as *jariyali* is also quite common in this region. The technique of picking fruits from the trees has been converted into a dance by the Garos. Dances are even based on the daily lives of pigeons.

Thus, one dance shows how pigeons collect their food, feed and fondle each other.

The Chakmas are known to celebrate a religious fair called the *Mahamuni*. At the beginning of the festival the statue of Mahamuni (the great sage) Buddha is placed at the temple. Then the young men and women perform together in a dance which is inspired by deep devotion. In addition, dances are performed by Chakmas [6] to have a good harvest and rainfall, and sometimes just for entertainment. The dance arranged for rainfall is participated not only by young people, but also by the older members of the community who come forward with full pitchers to spray water on the young ones

A dance popular by the Oraon tribe is the *karam* dance which is performed on the occasion of planting and harvesting. It's possible for this dance to last for a number of days and nights. Also the *jhuma* dance is performed for harvesting and the increase growth of crops. It is a unique and integral part of their social life. It begins with the dancers paying tributes to the god of crops with the dancers raising their hands and kneeling down to express their love and devotion to the Gods and Goddesses. [7] Through the dance they beseech the God to make them happy throughout the whole year to let them have better crops and to prevent them from various epidemics.

Tribal dances for the Bangladesh people were traditionally performed without any stage, makeup room, lighting etc. They were mainly to pay homage to the Gods and communicate through the environment. The musical instruments used could merely be a pair of bamboos. Television and

tourism have had an impact on tribal dancing, and stage, musical instruments, lightning and makeup have all become made more elaborate.

### **3. 1 Anlo-Ewe Tribe**

The Anlo Ewe tribe is based in the southern east of Ghana in Nigeria. They are believed to have settled there in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (1474). For this tribe, dance drumming is an integral part of community life and an important necessity in the pursuit of the collective destiny, perhaps essence of their shared experience. For the Anlo-Ewe Tribe everybody must participate in dance. According to *CK Ladzekpo*

*Non participation amounts to self excommunication from society as a whole and carries with it severe consequences in a similar manner as non performance of some civic obligations in other cultures of the world. The most severe penalty for non participation is to be denied a proper burial. Receiving a good burial is extremely important to the Anlo-Ewe. In contrast to other societies of the world that demonstrate the importance of having a good burial by buying funeral insurance from commercial funeral homes, the participation of the Anlo-Ewe in the collective and shared experiences of the community is the only insurance towards receiving the proper burial. CK Ladzekpo*

[http://www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/anlo\\_ewe.htm](http://www.africaguide.com/culture/tribes/anlo_ewe.htm)

This describes how essential it is for the Anlo-Ewe tribe to belong to a good dance group as way of communicating its social culture with other members. An old Anlo-Ewe proverb translates “ *You should join a dance group before you die.*” Dances such as this are a non profit venture as seen in western

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society. [8] You don't receive monetary compensation in the manner that hired musicians or dancers receive.

### **3. 4 The Sun Dance**

One of the most sacred ceremonies practiced by the north American Indians is known as the Sun dance. This ceremony was practiced by many different tribes but shared many things in common, such as dancing, singing, experience of visions, vows and for some tribes self torture. Those who participated in the dance would have believed to have a sense of well being, contentment and harmony with the environment. Animals such as buffalos and eagles were also incorporated in the ceremony to act as the communicator between man and the spirit.

*“ Common elements of the Sun Dance ceremony involves a pledger who makes a vow to perform the dance as a result of a dream or vision, a sweat lodge purification, the building of the Sun Dance lodge, smoking the sacred pipe, and the actual dance itself...Participants dances while gazing at the sun and blowing eagle-bone whistles, while attached to the sacred pole by thongs and skewers through chest the muscles and pulled outwards until the muscles tore free. The original sun dance was an occasion when all the tribe would gather to reaffirm their basic belief about the universal and the supernatural through ceremonies, words and symbolic objects.”*

The Native American Sun Dance Religion and ceremony Philip M. White

The buffalo was the symbol of life, some attached the buffalo's skull to their back. This form of self torture was considered highly honourable to the participants. The dance was a celebration of the generative power of the

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sun. It was important to their spirituality and a significant part of their life. It was only after intervention from the American government they banned the dance as it was seen insignificant to the new life of the west and they were repulsed by this new form of self torture inflicted. There were many who tried to bring the sun dance back to its original form and meaning but have not been successful.

### **3. 5 ABAKUA Dance**

The term Abakua dance comes from a secret society in Cuba. The Abakua tradition relates back to the African slaves brought to Cuba in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Abakua society was founded in Havana Cuba by the Efik, a subgroup of the Ibibio tribe.

Their dance consists of basic motives: self expression and physical release. One of the most basic motives of dance is the expression and communication of emotion. These motive forces can be seen not only in the spontaneous skipping, stamping and jumping movements often performed in moments of intense emotions, but also in the more formalised movement of " set" dances such as tribal war dances or festive folk dances. Yvonne Daniel (Rumba Dance and Social Change 1995, p36) describes the legacies in secret society coming from Africa being transported, replicated and transformed to a certain extent to fit the social environment of Cuba. Their dancing often re-enacts stories of mysterious beings who communicate through postures and gestures and the use of spirit masks. Here the emotions help generate emotions as well as communicate them through to others.

The Abakua dance (founded October 2000 by Franke Martine) company try's to portray this in their performances. They are made up of both dancers and drummers, the percussion marking out of the rhythm helps intensify the emotion. Frequently the dancers take turns performing, and there is usually a great deal of informal communication among the members of the stage.

### **3. 6. The Tribes in existence**

Present in our society today, there are a few tribes who keep their dance culture of paying homage to the Gods and divine. There are also some who use it as an aspect of healing and the preparation of a hunt. Despite all this, it does not seem to be an essential way of life as it was used during those times. Many have now been marked to entertain and impress the public.

The next chapter will now attempt to investigate these chang