

Dance as a Tool for Transcendence

By Kerri Ryan

Introduction

Dance has been employed by all cultures throughout history and acts to underpin the social fabric of a community. When used in a sacred context to achieve higher states of consciousness, dance can catapult the individual into communion with the spirit realm to access information, healing and outcomes for self and the wider social domain. In this paper I will investigate the dances of two cultures, the trance inducing Sun Dance of the American Plains Indians and the Yoruba spirit possession dance.

The Plains Indians employ different methods to promote trance induction to those of the Yoruba. Deprivation of food and water, extremes of pain and forced hypermotility or physical exhaustion are all used as a means to enter shamanic trance states.¹ Spirit possession cultures on the other hand, often employ converse tactics to entice a spirit to possess a dancer and will make ritual sacrifices as well as offer lavish feasts and favourite alcoholic beverages.²

While both traditions perform elaborate ceremonies to elicit power from the spirit realm, there are numerous examples of complicity as well as divergence in their ritual dances. I will compare and contrast these elements as I investigate dance as a tool for transcendence.

What is trance?

When seeking to understand the state of trance that dancers attain within ritual states, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of trance. This is a broad term which can include any altered state of consciousness (ASC) and which can be induced through numerous means including

¹ Jilek, W.G. *Altered States of Consciousness in North American Indian Ceremonials* (quoting Bleuler) p327

² Lum, K.A. *Praising His Name in the Dance* p114

drugs, meditation, sleep deprivation, pain, hypnosis, out of body experiences, dance and innumerable others. Using the terms trance and altered state of conscious interchangeably, Jilek defines it thus:

“Altered states of consciousness have become an accepted designation for phenomena experienced and observed in hypnotic or meditative trance, in so-called hysterical dissociation, in ecstatic states of religious revelation, or during ‘possession’ by a defined power or spiritual entity, usually of ancestral, celestial, or infernal provenance. The differences between these variously labeled states depend on the situational and sociocultural context.”³

Charles Tart has done much research into this area and offers us this:

“An altered state of consciousness for a given individual is one in which he clearly feels a qualitative shift in his pattern of mental functioning, that is he feels not just a quantitative shift, but also that some quality or qualities of his mental processes are different.”⁴

Manfred Bleuler’s concept of ‘shifting consciousness’ includes a list of conditions that may be found present during altered states of consciousness:

“(1) reduction of exteroceptive stimulation and/or motor activity; (2) increase of exteroceptive stimulation, motor hyperactivity, and emotional hyperarousal; (3) focused and selective hyperalertness; (4) decreased alertness and relaxation of critical faculties; and (5) somato-psychological states such as hyperventilation, hypoxemia, dehydration, hypoglycemia, sleep deprivation and exposure to extreme temperatures.”⁵

When we look at the dances of both the American Plains Indians and the Yoruban spirit possession traditions, we will find differing elements of the above present in both.

The trance state can encompass many aspects and levels of trance and has a strong cultural connection to a particular society’s beliefs about it. Becker defines trance as “a state of mind characterized by intense focus, the loss of the strong sense of self and access to types of knowledge and experience that are inaccessible in non-trance states”. The trance state itself varies and it is important to note the numerous levels of trance available. There is the quiet meditative state of trance which we all have experienced perhaps listening to beautiful music, then there is the shamanic trance, the vision trance, the possession trance, the communal trance,

³ Jilek, W.G. *Altered States of Consciousness in North American Indian Ceremonials* p326

⁴ Tart, C. *Altered States of Consciousness* p1-6

⁵ Jilek, W.G. *Altered States of Consciousness in North American Indian Ceremonials* (quoting Bleuler) p327

the aesthetic trance and also higher isolated experiences of ecstasy where transcendence is reached.⁶

Becker says that trance is often a learned behaviour that carries the belief systems of a particular culture. Being able to enter into trance has a direct correlation to having watched others in trance states and observing their demonstrated behaviour. Many cultures perform various rituals that are embedded in an ontology which determines appropriate behaviour and it is found that people entering trance, behave in the same way as they have observed the phenomenon since childhood. Also, that the behaviour is highly predictable and will follow a prescribed pattern. That does not mean that Balinese trancers performing the Rangda witch ritual will behave the same way as American Pentacostals.⁷

Becker states that trance is common to all cultures. From the whirling dervishes to the shamanic healers, trance forms a fundamental part of all cultural experiences and is as “species-specific as music and language are”. She comments about the United States as being generally hostile to trance, citing few positive role models, but notes that despite this, there is survey evidence to support many Americans having had mystical experiences. The research of Greeley, McCready and William James⁸ is referred to which states that while there is a tendency for Westerners and Americans in particular to think of trance as a phenomenon which occurs in less developed countries, “trance is fairly common even among middle-class, well-educated Americans”.

When dance and trance combine

Some of the elements most commonly found when trance or ASC occur, include rhythmic movement or dance and music, and for numerous cultures dance performed in a ritual context serves as a direct means to enter into communion with the spirit world. Ritual dance is seldom performed without the accompaniment of music and drums, and it is the repetitive percussive rhythms often together with chanting over extended periods of time, that stimulate the senses and

⁶ Becker, J. *Music and Trance* p41-42

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Becker, J. *Music and Trance* p43

transport the dancer into trance states. These elements are common to the Plains Indians and the Yoruba possession traditions and we will explore their uses.

Namba and Fridman cite the elements commonly associated with trance dance as being “patterned body movements, rhythmic behaviour, symbolic meaning of specific steps, movements and gestures and aesthetic criteria” all with the intent of moving the dancer into trance. They comment that when these elements are integrated into a formula of religious ritual, its cultural meaning may differ, but the experiences of the dancer will fall into one of two broad categories: the visionary experience, where communion with the numinous is achieved and remembered; or a possession experience where the spirit entity takes over the body of the individual and leaves them with no memory of the event. Namba and Fridman comment on the commonalities associated with both groups who will experience changes in the perception of time, space and the self, and altered sensory capacities such as their ability to endure extremes of pain, thirst, temperature etc. They also experience memory shifts, changes in their suggestibility and learning and post trance, often exhibit heightened states of euphoria and energy.⁹

When dance and trance combine in a ritual or religious setting, the common aim is to seek union with the spirit beings that are culturally embedded within the particular tradition. The purpose can be to seek healing for the tribe, to pay honour to the dead, or to reinforce and maintain the social structures that bind the community. In the case of the ritual Sun Dance of the North American Plains Indians, the dancer seeks a personal vision of power for himself and the community. The elaborate ritual is embedded in a formal religious ceremony which can occur over a period of up to 14 days. It can involve the coming together of a number of tribes and takes place when the sun is at its zenith, around the time of the summer solstice.

The Sun Dance of the Plains Indians

The North American Plains Indians encompass numerous different tribes, their customs and dancing traditions especially in relation to the Sun Dance ritual which Jorgensen suggests was first known to exist around 1700 with the Cheyenne. From somewhere around 1750, there

⁹ Namba, M.N. & Fridman, E.J.N. *Shamanism: an Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Cultures* p247-248

appeared to be a rapid diffusion of the ceremony throughout numerous plains tribes due to various tribal alliances and trading. By the late 1700's, early 1800's this ceremony was the most revered and sacred of all religious rituals performed. Each tribe personalized their reasons for performance and how and when the Dance took place, but there was a common cosmology that understood the dance ensured a plentiful and successful buffalo hunt, the wellbeing and healing of the tribal community and the accessing of a universal power source known as *wakan*. Some older dancers might undertake the ordeal to prove themselves as powerful shaman, but to dance meant to access power. It is to be noted that only the men dance. This is a dance that requires the individual to undergo intense feats of endurance including torture, fasting, thirsting and mutilation.¹⁰

By the end of the 1800's the spectacular Dance ritual in its original form had all but vanished due to the suppression of the US military, Indian agents and other federal employees. Most Indian tribes were rounded up and made to live on reservations and the very private and sacred ceremony was abhorrent to the sensibilities of the white man who outlawed it. A form of religious persecution began during the 1880's with one outspoken Federal Agent by the name of McGillycuddy taking the attitude that "...every vestige of heathen religion had to be eliminated before civilization could take firm root." Indeed the powers of the agents were dictatorial and all obvious signs of any ceremony or dancing were totally forbidden.¹¹

From about the 1930's the US Government changed its laws (although piercing remained forbidden until the 1950's) and the more empowered Indian tribes again took up the once outlawed Dance in an effort to reinvigorate the culture with purpose and tradition. By then, the Sun Dance ritual had changed forever to meet a new generation and cultural purpose, and while performed in alliance with the older customs, had lost its connection to great spirit (*Wakan Tanka*).¹² It is the original Sun Dance rituals of the 1800's which I wish to address, investigating the elements of dance, rhythm, dehydration, starvation, exhaustion, pain and mutilation that propel the seeker of power into states of trance.

¹⁰ Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance religion* p17

¹¹ DeMallie R.J. (1982) *The Lakota Ghost Dance* p400

¹² Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance religion* p18

Earlier I outlined the research of Namba and Fridman¹³ who comment that states of trance fall into two categories: the visionary experience and the possession experience. The purpose of the Sun Dancers is to achieve a state of trance that will grant them a vision of power. For many this is the culmination of up to four days dancing where they neither drink nor eat and undergo extreme tortures, sometimes hanging from the flesh on their chest or back from poles for hours on end. The visions of power for many tribes come from the buffalo which will appear to them after they have collapsed in exhaustion and entered into the trance state. Jorgensen describes the physical or emotional point where some dancers receive a jolt of power from the Buffalo which throws them into the air or completely knocks them down.¹⁴

It is to be noted that not all tribes undertook the extreme torture elements of flesh piercing and tearing. The Utes and the Fort Hall Shoshones did not always undertake this practice, but for many tribes such as the Lakota and Sioux this was an integral part of the ritual, the scars of which the warriors wore with pride.

I will now investigate the ritual components of the Sun Dance and outline the formulaic elements that combine to thrust the dancers into states of transcendence. Various elements must be in place to set the scene for the ritual and I outline these below.

The Sun Dance is so named because the sun is deemed to be a great source of power. An overarching theme common to all sun dancers is the acquisition of power and power is acquired through various elements. The circle or corral that is created for the dance is aligned for the dancers to face into the sun, drawing on the strength of its powerful force. With eyes open, the dancers stare into the sun for hours on end. Lincoln explains the importance of the sun with the dance acting as a tool to access the power and energy manifest at the time of the year when the sun is at its zenith, the summer solstice. He says according to the Lakota, the central pole or sacred tree forms a *vertical conjunction* through which this great power is channeled and around which the dancers perform their ritual.¹⁵ Riggs states that the sun is beseeched to witness their

¹³ Namba, M.N. & Fridman, E.J.N. *Shamanism: an Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Cultures* p247-248

¹⁴ Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance religion* p213

¹⁵ Lincoln, B. *A Lakota Sun dance and the Problematics of Sociocosmic Reunion* p 5

dance as they appeal for power to achieve victory over their enemies. It is believed that the sun can also communicate their dream or vision to them.¹⁶

The pole or tree which is central to the whole ritual is another sacred element utilized to channel power. The chief of the Shoshones will specially select a tree where a mock battle will take place with warriors charging the tree prior to it being cut down and prayed over before its erection in the central corral.¹⁷ For the Lakota it is the oldest woman in the tribe who selects the tree and together with the youngest virginal girls, the tree is stripped of limbs and bark before the warriors charge at the first light of dawn. Under an assault of rifles, arrows and lances, the tree is attacked and if it should fall, another one will be chosen. The tree is then cut down and ceremoniously erected as the central pole.¹⁸ Once in place the pole is painted and decorated with ritual objects. It is believed that the central pole is the channel for supernatural power, either from the sun, the moon or the ritual fire. Ritual objects such as eagle feathers adorning its apex or a bison skull lashed to the middle, all channel power into and through the pole.¹⁹ As the dancers dance throughout the day and night they move from the perimeter of the circle to the central pole and back again, drawing energy from this great power source.²⁰

The Sun Dance heralded a time of festival when numerous tribes would meet. Many additional rituals were performed including the acting out of visions, demonstrations of power by the medicine men, the piercing of babies' ears (an essential for identity with the Lakota), courting between the young and lavish community giveaways. In the words of Little Wound, American Horse and Lone Star "The Sun dance is the greatest ceremony that the Oglalas do. It is a sacred ceremony in which all the people have a part. The ceremony of the Sun dance may embrace all the ceremonies of any kind that are relative to the gods (*Wakan Tanka*)."²¹

¹⁶ Holler, C. *Black Elk's Religion* p41 (quoting Riggs)

¹⁷ Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance religion* p19

¹⁸ Holler, C. *Black Elk's Religion* p59

¹⁹ Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance Religion* p182

²⁰ As a shamanic tool, the pole or tree operates as the axis mundi and is seen as the channel between worlds and through which the shaman can safely travel to other realms. In the context of the Sun Dance the pole becomes the gateway to channel power from the other realms from which the dancer can draw strength to achieve his vision.

²¹ DeMallie R.J. (1982) *The Lakota Ghost Dance* p400

The warriors who choose to undergo the three to four day ritual of privation to seek power and visions, do so with the whole support of the tribe. The rest of the community prepare the ritual ceremony grounds and provide a support team for each dancer who will tend him in rest breaks. There are purification sweat lodges to prepare, ritual fires to tend, singing teams and drummers.²² When the dance begins, each of the dancers will forgo all food, sexual relations, water or rest and endure extremes of exhaustion and pain, all the while being exhorted to keep dancing until they transcend to the spirit realm and are granted their vision of power.

When the dance is ready to begin, the chief or shaman charged with the task, will make incisions in the flesh on the arms, chest or shoulders through which a cord of horse hair is passed. This is then attached to the central pole which the dancer will then charge away from again and again, over an extended period of time, attempting to break through the flesh. Alternatively the cords are attached to a buffalo head which lies on the ground behind the dancer. Each movement of the body pulls on the cords, dragging the head behind, as the dancer strains to rip free from his bonds.²³

Holler quotes Schwatka who was an eye witness to a Sun Dance in 1875. He has this to say:

“Then each one of the young men presented himself to a medicine-man, who took between his thumb and forefinger a fold of the loose skin of the breast, about half way between the nipple and collar-bone, lifted it as high as possible, and then ran a very narrow-bladed but sharp knife through the skin underneath the hand. In the aperture thus made, and before the knife was withdrawn a stronger skewer of bone was inserted. A figure-eight knot was made fast to the skewer. Both breasts were thus pierced, the leads being mated to a rope, which in turn was attached to the rope of the sun pole. To break loose was a ‘horrible task’ that even for the most resolute may require many hours of torture. The first attempts are very easy and seem intended to get him used to the horrible pain he must yet endure before he breaks loose. ...his shouts increase, huge drops of perspiration pour down his greasy, painted skin, and every muscle stands out on his body in tortuous ridges, his swaying frame, as he throws his whole weight wildly against the fearful fetters, being convulsed by shudders.”²⁴

Schwatka writes that he has “seen the skewers stretched to nearly an arm’s length from the dancer’s chest with the amount of time necessary to free the dancer being the longest reported in

²² Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance Religion* p177

²³ Holler, C. *Black Elk’s Religion* p46-47

²⁴ Holler, C. *Black Elk’s Religion* p61

the literature. Generally in two or three hours the victim is free, but there are many cases where double and even triple that time is required.”²⁵

Another rite practised by the Sisonway, Sioux, Crow and Dakotas, amongst others, takes the extremes of torture to another level in the ritual of sacrifice. Rather than dance to receive their visions, these tribes practice a most severe form of self-sacrifice where a knife is passed through the breast or arms attaching leather thongs and cords to the top of the central ritual pole, where the warrior must hang for two, three or four days until he receives his vision. They hang, suspended only by the cords, with their minds fixed on the intention of their vision. Each day they are checked to see if the vision has been received and if so, they are cut down. This is not about breaking through the flesh, but enduring extreme pain to encourage their trance state and vision.²⁶

On the first day as the dancing begins, the songs are sung and the drummers set a beat at between 120 and 160 beats per minute. The dance sets are composed of four songs and last up to five minutes each. Each dancer moves up to and back from the central pole within an individually allocated area. Moving to their own style, each dancer may gyrate or bob up and down. Some of the older dancers keep a steady rhythm, expending as little energy as possible. The steps are taken from dreams or borrowed from other dancers. As time passes, the dance sets lengthen and the drum rhythm increases from 200 – 210 beats per minute.²⁷ It is here we can observe the “patterned body movements, rhythmic behaviour, symbolic meaning of specific steps, movements, gestures and aesthetic criteria” cited by Namba and Fridman as forming the classic criteria to move a dancer into trance.²⁸

On each succeeding day and each following session, the intensity of the rhythm increases. It is on the last day that a dancer expects to receive his vision. Having gone without food or water for several days, he is exhausted and dehydrated. Now a dance may last as long as 35 minutes with a tempo of 200 – 300 beats per minute. Each set sees the dancer move deeper into his trance state,

²⁵ Ibid p62

²⁶ Ibid p46

²⁷ Jorgensen, J. *The Sun Dance Religion* p188-191

²⁸ Namba, M.N. & Fridman, E.J.N. *Shamanism: an Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Cultures* p247-248

seeking his vision. All the singers and women beat in time with the rhythm and yell out encouragement. Spectators will make war whoops and hearten the dancers. Here the shamans will challenge each individual, preaching about the importance of the vision quest, pushing them to transcend and seek their ultimate power.²⁹

When a dancer receives his vision he will be hit as if by a jolt of lightning. Jorgensen says the power surge will lift his feet up level with his head before he falls to the ground. There he will lay motionless while his soul is off *visioning*. His support team move his body from the dance area and position his head towards the center pole so that the energy has free flow into and out of his body. He may remain in this position for an hour while his soul travels and when he awakens, he will be completely refreshed and revitalised.³⁰ Again we see the elements suggested by Namba & Freidman in relation to behaviour exhibited in post trance states of *heightened states of euphoria and energy*.³¹ With his final vision quest achieved, the Sun Dancer has fulfilled his purpose and the whole tribe celebrates with great feasting.

Assessment of trance elements

Earlier I made reference to Becker's³² comments that entering trance has a direct correlation to a cultural ontology formed by watching others in trance since childhood. That is borne out by the dancers who achieve trance states and visions in alignment with strict adherence to ceremonial ritual that coincides with tribal spiritual beliefs and practices. While the Sun Dancer may take up to 4 days to achieve his vision of power, there is a week of preparations beforehand to ready both dancer and space for the ritual. Those preparations include selection of the site, erection of the central pole, a ritual fire to be lit, vows to be made and ritual sweat baths to be taken, amongst numerous other events, all done to align with an ontology that prepares the space and dancer for transcendence. In the belief system of the Plains Indians all these elements are an absolutely necessary and integral part to support the dancer to seek his vision.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid p192

³¹ Namba, M.N. & Fridman, E.J.N. *Shamanism: an Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Cultures* p247-248

³² Becker, J. *Music and Trance* p41-42

In conjunction with the ritually prepared environment, the physical elements required for trance are then invoked. Winkelman speaks of the measurable brain discharge patterns which will create certain behaviours, emotions and thoughts related to trance and ASCs. These he posits, are a natural outcome of the nervous system as it responds to certain stimuli. Winkelman describes those elements as extreme fatigue, near starvation, dance, dehydration, drumming, chanting and pain which are all utilized in the Sun Dance and which as a natural brain function, will propel the individual into trance states.³³

While trance and ASCs can be induced by solely using the elements above to stimulate the nervous system, a greater and more holistic ritual involving the whole tribal community over an extended period of time is employed in the dance performance. The preparation beforehand and the ritual elements employed combine to create a *religious ceremony* that is the Sun Dance.

When we observe the possession dance of the Yoruba, interestingly enough many of the elements found in the Sun Dance are also evident. While trance can occur through employment of any of the elements we have already discussed, what we again find is a cosmology that supports community involvement in ritual and ceremonial worship of the Orisha deities.

The Yoruba spirit possession dance

The spirit possession traditions came from the African slave diaspora over the four and a half centuries of the slave trade up until the late 1800's. These spirit possession religions also include the traditions known as Vodou, Candomble and Santeria and belong to the African slaves who brought their practices and beliefs to the new world.

The Yoruba people and their religion came from Nigeria in West Africa and took deep hold in African communities in Brazil and Cuba, eventually spreading to European-American communities in these countries as well as the United States.³⁴ Slavery was abolished in Cuba by 1886 but by that time, of the 10 million African slaves shipped to the new world, some 700,000

³³ Winkelman *Shamanism as the Original Neurotheology* p198

³⁴ National Association of Yoruba Descendants in North America

were sent directly to Cuba. As a comparison, only 427,000 slaves of that total were sent to the United States.³⁵ From this we can understand how the cultural and religious cosmology of the Yoruba found a home, transported on the slave ships to the new world of Cuba.

The Yoruba worship a pantheon of deities known as "Orishas" who represent aspects of nature and spirit. In order to preserve their religious traditions against Christian repression, "the African slaves syncretized the Orishas with Catholic saints" and still today worship their gods and goddesses along side the Christian deities.³⁶ In all countries to which slaves were exported, slave masters often prohibited the practice of native culture and worship. With Catholicism as the embedded religion, the slaves found parallels existing between their gods and the Christian gods. The Catholics had saints and the Africans had Orishas. Santeria as we know it today is a hybrid of beliefs and practices developed by the African slaves' encounter with the Roman Catholic Church and French spiritism.³⁷

The Yoruba people and the religion of Santeria believe in an ultimate power just as the Plains Indians and Christians do. Their high god is *Olodumare*. Like all high power sources, (s)he is transcendent and not available to interact in everyday affairs. So like the Catholic Saints, the Orishas serve the purpose of acting as intermediaries between the earthly plain and the spirit realm. In Cuba today there are 16 major Orisha and each has a Catholic saint equivalent.³⁸

Lum reminds us that each Orisha has their own individual ceremony where they are worshipped through distinctive drum rhythms, music, songs, food and sacrificial animals. Those particular drum rhythms and songs when played and sung serve to draw that particular Orisha into the ritual. When they manifest, they enjoy eating their own favourite foods and performing their specific dances. The Orishas also interact with each other, having sexual and personal relationships.³⁹

³⁵ Lefever, H. *When the Saints Go Riding In* p319

³⁶ African Anthropology – General Resources

³⁷ Lefever, H. *When the Saints Go Riding In* p319

³⁸ Ibid p 320

³⁹ Lum, K.A. *Praising His Name in the Dance* p114

The ultimate purpose of any successful ceremonial dance is to entice one of the Orisha to manifest. Where the Sun Dancers seek a personal visionary experience for themselves, the Yoruba dance to loose themselves in a possession trance, allowing the manifest deity to communicate with worshippers. Earlier I referred to the research of Namba and Fridman who say that the trance state of the dancer will fall into one of two broad categories: the visionary experience, or the possession experience.⁴⁰ Where we have investigated the visionary trance of the Sun Dancers, we now look at the possession trance of the Yoruba.

Like the Sun Dancers who seek a vision of power, the Yoruba also dance to seek power, but the power is associated with possession by one of the Orisha deities. The power is accessed and made manifest from the ritual sacrifices and preparations beforehand and Davis tells us that one of the necessary goals of the ritual is to seek enough power or *ocha* to build the required energy for the Orisha to manifest.⁴¹ Lum describes the possession in terms of the dancer being *mounted*, with the Orisha entering in through the head and taking over possession and control of the whole body. The Orisha deity will then use the body of the medium to communicate with his or her devotees. The *mount* or *horse* becomes a vessel or instrument of the particular Orisha.⁴² Awolalu describes is thus:

“When this happens, the ‘possessed’ person says and does thing which he would not normally say or do. He becomes a changed person; he dances in a strange fashion, he becomes wild and uncontrollable in some cases. In this state, he makes utterances, and people receive messages as coming from the divinity that is now personified in the medium. Through such a medium, messages are received from the spiritual realm and men are given knowledge of things that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to know.”⁴³

Like the preparation of the circular corral space and the ritual elements necessary prior to the Sun Dance, the circular performance area of the spirit dance is highly ritualized as well. The central post or the axis mundi which acted as a channel of power in the Sun Dance is known as the *potomitan* in the Orisha dance. This is a substantial wooden centre post which aids in the

⁴⁰ Namba, M.N. & Fridman, E.J.N. *Shamanism: an Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Cultures* p247-248

⁴¹ Davis, R. *American Voudou* p22

⁴² Lum, K.A. *Praising His Name in the Dance* p223

⁴³ *Ibid* (quoting Awolalu) p233

connection between the spirit and human worlds and which is sunk deep into the earth.⁴⁴ Preparation of the circular dance space includes cleansing, decoration and blessing with painted artistic lines or circular configurations drawn on the earthen surface, walls, objects and in the air. The whole performance space vibrates with the spiritual energy and intention imbued into it.⁴⁵

Daniel explains that as the crowds of performers and singers enter into the circular space known as the *palais*, there will often be seven to ten dancers in eight rows forming a semi-circle, opposing the drummers in another semi-circle opposite them. Dancing will take place in a counterclockwise direction around the centre-post, surrounded by family, community and guests. Daniel speaks of the circular performance space that provides energetic spirit or life force known as *ache* which is necessary to support the successful Orisha manifestation.⁴⁶

Preparations will begin the night before the dance, with ritual sacrifices being made and food prepared and cooked. The *palais* will be ceremoniously prepared with prayers and ritual offerings. The dancing will begin some time in the early afternoon with all those who wish to dance doing so. This is a celebratory time with much socializing, singing and drumming. As the night wears on the rhythms change and the dancing becomes more frenetic as the practised and serious dancers prepare themselves for the Orisha to arrive. Most ceremonies last all night and continue till dawn with exhausted participants leaving in first light.

Yvonne Daniel has not only conducted anthropological research into the Orishas, but is a student of the dance and has learnt and performed the intricate rhythms, chants, gestures and steps required to call the Orisha to manifest. Here she describes her dance for Oya, who is the Goddess of the Winds of Change, the primeval mother of chaos who uses her machete, or sword of truth to cut through stagnation and clear the way for new growth and change. She is a wild woman, mother of lightning, fire, tornadoes, earthquakes and storms.⁴⁷ Like the Sun Dancers, she speaks of seeking power from the spirit beings as the dance steps and increasing rhythm becomes a form of worship.

⁴⁴ Daniel, Y. *Dancing Wisdom* p8

⁴⁵ Ibid p52

⁴⁶ Ibid p81

⁴⁷ Waldherr, K. *The Book of Goddesses* p 107-108

“In the beginning of Oya’s dance performance, you see balance, a slow rhythm, alternating spheres of existence. Marking the cardinal directions, left, forward, right, back. Oya is forceful, militant, dynamic, changing constantly. Her arms wave majestically and authoritatively. Repetition is critical. It is necessary to build and intensify each body part’s movement. At first the dancing worshiper is fully confident, engrossed in the muscular movement, articulating every nuance in every part of the body. The mind is submerged in the dancing and music, discerning mysteries. *Both the body and the mind transcend.*

Then there is a complete shift in the air: Oya is a screaming buffalo. There is a change to Oya’s most aggressive movement pattern. The buffalo-warrior is imminent. It is as if you cannot dance any harder or more correctly. From three huge torso undulations, the arms crash to the sides, slashing downward from high in the air. Then she starts to whirl, spin and churn the air like a tornado, hurricane and cyclone. Her spinning force connotes that she has little fear of others, of death or even fear itself; she is female all powerful. She is the female warrior who gallops and swirls across space and through time.”⁴⁸

Daniels explains that the dance ceremonies tap into a depth of knowing and emotional states within the body, its function and social psychology and quotes Walker who says *Dance ceremonies are carefully constructed sets of deeply engaging, visual, rhythmic, sensory stimulation that result in specific emotional and physical behaviours. The sacred order of chants, drumming and dancing unfold and layer physiological principles that result in ecstatic experiences, both conscious and unconscious.*⁴⁹

Drumming is an essential aspect that supports the complex rhythms required to call each Orisha. The ceremonial drummers themselves are held in high regard by the community and paid well for their services. Their instruments are sacred and used for no other purpose but within a ritual context and some are said to be owned by a particular Orisha which are decorated and used only to call that particular deity. The three drums used are the bembé which is the largest, the congo which is smaller and tuned to a lower pitch and the omilay which is the smallest of the three and tuned to a higher pitch. Other instruments used are the shac-shacs which are similar to the maracas and are gourds filled with seeds.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid p248-250

⁴⁹ Ibid p78 (quoting Walker)

⁵⁰ Lum, K. *Praising His Name in the Dance* p110

Within the ritual performance, the drummers provide rhythmic patterns that are repeated and intensified. It is these certain patterns played in specific sequences repetitively that create physical, emotional and spiritual transformation on the dancing body. A master drummer will assess the dancing worshippers, seeking out those who need deeper, faster or richer support by offering extensions and multiples of rhythms. A dancer may be exhibiting the steps required to call a particular Orisha, and the drummer will then shift the pattern to intensify the rhythms that support that deity. The drummers effectively regulate the whole worship ritual, controlling the patterns, rhythms and tempo of the dancers and gauging exactly the timing when the Orisha will manifest.⁵¹

Daniels explains the intricate relationship that exists between worshippers and the necessary ritual required for the Orisha to appear. This is about the wider community, not just the dancers, and in preparation for Oya to appear, all the worshippers must be bathed or dusted in certain leaves and herbs, lavender water or rain water. As mentioned before, each Orisha has very specific likes and dislikes and food offerings contain individual preferences. For example, Oya prefers eggplant, sweet potatoes, black-eyed peas with goats, hens, pigeons and guinea fowl which are ritually sacrificed and their blood drained into specifically dug holes which are dedicated to each deity. All sacrificed animals are cooked under strict ritual circumstances and form part of the greater ceremony that supports Oya's appearance. Daniels impresses upon us that for manifestation to occur from the invisible to the visible, the ancestors are accorded recognition from the whole community through these ritual preparations and offerings. The use of food, flowers, herbs, liquids and alcohol are symbolic affirmations of a greater social and religious worship that represents a reciprocity of behaviour between community and spirit. If the appropriate offerings and rituals are not performed correctly, the Orisha will often not manifest.⁵²

Once the dancer achieves a transcendental state, they become the conduit through which the Orisha can manifest into the physical. Once manifest, the divinity becomes the embodied adviser for the community, moving amongst the worshippers, offering remedies, advising grandmothers on health issues, dancing with them, eating with them, offering solutions for everyday problems

⁵¹ Daniel, Y. *Dancing Wisdom* p87-88

⁵² Ibid p250

and healing quarrelling neighbours. Daniel comments that ritual performances provide *social cohesion between the living ancestors and the cosmological divinities*. Community relationships are reaffirmed, social wounds are healed and every individual member is accounted for and reaffirmed. The regular dance performance functions as *holistic medicine* for the whole community.⁵³

Assessment of trance elements

In the research of Namba and Fridman⁵⁴ where they cite the common elements of dance that will move an individual into a possession experience, it can be seen that the Orisha dancers absolutely rely keenly on complex, rhythmic, patterned body movements to enter into a possession trance state. What must be reaffirmed is the greater and larger context of the whole community and their involvement, which can only be termed as religious worship, that support the manifestation of the deities upon the dancers. The microcosm of the dance itself is insufficient to support manifestation of the deity without the macrocosm of the community support framework.

In that context, the Plains Indians and the Yoruba appear to have more in common than not. The reasons for the dance are generally the same. The male Indian dancers may seek personal glorification, but the dance is a community event, performed to gain power and healing within the wider social context. Interestingly enough Ward speaks of Voodoo possession ceremonies as operating within cults and that the benefits attributed to possession displays, include *recognition, awe and respect paid by ritual participants, control over behaviour of other cult members and interpersonal relations not often allowed outside the ceremonial context. ...it allows for ego gratification by power tactics and subsequent prestige gain in the subculture.*⁵⁵ I am sure personal power can corrupt within any structure, but Daniels is at pains to have us see the possession trance ritual as religious worship practised for the benefit of the wider community.⁵⁶

⁵³ Ibid p55 and p251-252

⁵⁴ Namba, M.N. & Fridman, E.J.N. *Shamanism: an Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Cultures* p247-248

⁵⁵ Ward, C. *Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession and Self-Mortification Practices* p 316

⁵⁶ Daniel, Y. *Dancing Wisdom* p251-252

For both cultures, the whole community are involved in the preparation of the dance space and in preparing the dancers themselves. The dance event requires the participation of drummers, singers and various other support rituals. The type of trance achieved by the two groups is different, visionary for the Sun Dancers and possession for the Yoruba. The Sun Dancers use different techniques involving extremes of deprivation and pain to achieve states of trance, while the possession dancers rely more on providing sacrificial offerings and intricate rhythms and dance steps to call the Orisha to manifest.

Both the Yoruba people and the Plains Indians are historically tribal cultures whose indigenous beliefs are earth or nature based. Practices that invoke connection with spirit through trance states induced by self mortification or possession were viewed by European cultures as savage or heathen and must be eradicated so that civilization of the beast can occur. Understandably, with such pressure from the hegemonic cultures into which they had to integrate, the original nature of each of the trance religions has undergone dramatic transformation over the last 150 years. Let us now look at the present day context into which these trance inducing religions have morphed.

Present Day Cultural Context

Plains Indians

The revival of the Sun Dance in the 1930's saw a change in governmental attitudes that permitted the Plains Indians access to their own indigenous culture and practices, albeit with piercing forbidden. The 1950's saw a new era of the dance which was mainly a staged performance for tourists that provided much needed revenue for the impoverished tribal governments to raise funds. But it was not until 1972 that thirty activists of the American Indian Movement (AIM) danced and pierced at a Lakota Sun Dance ritual held at Pine Ridge reservation. This saw a return to the sacred religious ritual, supported by traditional elders, that made a powerful statement about ethnic identity and political militance.⁵⁷

Since that time the number of participants has steadily grown with the Sun Dance being performed as an expression of ethnic solidarity. Traditional practices are employed and there is a

⁵⁷ Lincoln, B. A Lakota Sun Dance and the Problematics of Sociocosmic Reunion p9

tendency for greater severity with longer and more strenuous dancing and deeper and more excruciating piercing. Women are now allowed to dance, though very few undergo the piercing. Some groups are closed to only Lakota, but others permit white men who are allowed to dance, as long as they observe all the required rituals. An increase in attendance by whites, is in direct correlation with the *new age* interest in Native American spirituality. The tribal leaders of AIM believe that the integration of whites allows for an appreciation of indigenous beliefs and practices and that greater understanding and harmony can emanate into the wider community and into the future.⁵⁸

Yoruba

The original religious worship of the Yoruba as practised by the slaves in Cuba has been in a perpetual state of transformation as, like the Plains Indians, their form of devotion was forbidden. From the earliest assimilation of Catholic Saints into their worship, creating what is now known as Santeria, the possession trance traditions have evolved with the host culture as Cubans have migrated to the United States, Brazil and other countries.

Santeria was barely known in the United States prior to 1959 but in 1980 there was the Mariel boat lift that saw 125,000 Cubans arrive in the country, mainly from middle and lower working classes bringing with them the beliefs and rituals which form the basis of Santeria today. A 1994 census provided figures of 1,044,000 Cubans living in the United States. Because of the secrecy surrounding this type of worship, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the numbers and various strains of this religion now practised. Many non-Cubans such as Latinos, African Americans as well as Anglos have taken on the worship with conservative suggestions in the United States suggesting a figure of 500,000 practitioners.⁵⁹

Beliefs have changed within Santeria with a move away from a mythological structure to the more ethical principles of Christianity.⁶⁰ Lefever says that the original pantheon of 16 deities is downsized to 7 with the ritual initiations for all adherents being reduced from periods of 3 years

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Lefever, H. *When the Saints Go Riding In* p323

⁶⁰ Lefever, H. *When the Saints Go Riding In* quoting Sandoval, M. Santeria: AfroCuban concepts of disease and its Treatment in Miami p323

to sometimes 3 months. Also fewer actual trance-possession are taking place due to the consecrated *bata* drums not being available or not played due to negative reactions from neighbours. In New York, Santeria is becoming more syncretized with Puerto Rican spiritism, coining a new term for the practice known as *Santerismo*.⁶¹

While some believe that Santeria is losing its roots and traditions, others believe it is becoming more universally available, attracting a variety of practitioners and social classes. Those that express discontent with the watering down of the religion are taking a conservative stance, leading the teachings back to the original Yoruban practices, fostering the importance of learning the African languages and preserving the traditions.⁶²

With both the Plains Indians and the spirit possession traditions, change is inevitable and each will manifest in the current milieu in accordance with its strongest adherents and government policy.

Conclusion

Trance as a form of religious worship is common to numerous cultures around the world and is still practised by many today, but it is not something that is embraced within the western thought or cultural processes and indeed was intentionally eradicated by Europeans. It can be safe to say that many of those cultures who still practice it today can be found in third world countries, like the Balinese who dance the Rangda witch ritual or the body piercing trance of the Malaysian Hindu Thaipusam.

The two cultures that I examined, the Plains Indians and the African Yoruba employed trance as a means for connecting with spirit helpers who they found imminent in the elements of nature surrounding them, like the rivers or the winds for the Yoruba and the buffalo or fire or sun for the Indians. These spirit helpers are available to be used as intermediaries to connect with the higher force that we know as god and can be petitioned through the dancers' trance state to effect the

⁶¹ Lefever, H. *When the Saints Go Riding In* p323

⁶² *Ibid* p324

requested outcomes. It has been the tribal and earth-based religions that have accessed this power through either their vision trances or possession trances. What is important to remember is that these ritual trance dances are just one element that form part of the greater cosmological belief system of worship that involves the whole community, whose involvement is critical in the culmination of successful contact with the spirit realm.

Both these two traditions dance to access power and use states of trance to achieve transcendence of the earthly realm and find direct communion with the spirit world. Seeking personal power from transcendent beings without the intermediary of a priest is not something the Christian religions can condone, and it is not difficult to understand why these practices were totally misunderstood and deemed heathen, even in the more enlightened and current present day beliefs. Whilst the American Indians are now allowed to honour their traditional practices by the government, the practice of Santeria, Voudou and Candomble are still very much underground and not acceptable to western sensibilities.

REFERENCES:

African Anthropology – General Resources -

http://www.archaeolink.com/african_art_studies_yoruba.htm (accessed 26 October 2007)

Becker, J. (1994) *Music and Trance*, Leonardo Music Journal, Vol 4, pp 41-51

Becker discussed the broader contexts of trance and its relationship with music across numerous cultures. She brings in the argument that trance is culturally imbedded in a cosmology that shapes the experiences of the trancer, who will behave in states as witnessed since childhood.

Daniel, Y. (2005) *Dancing Wisdom 'Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba and Bahian Candomble'* University of Illinois Press, Illinois

As an anthropologist and a dance technician of the possession trance cultures, Yvonne Daniel has spent the greater part of her life, living, breathing, studying and dancing the traditions she writes about. She writes from a space of personal experience and initiation as well as being academically trained. This was the most useful of all my reference material.

Davis, R. (1999) *American Voudou, Journey into a Hidden World*, University of North Texas Press, Denton, Texas

This text was of secondary importance. It was more of a retelling of a road trip experience, rather than investigation at an academic level. It did a lot of interviewing and primary research, but didn't pull it together to create any real arguments. It didn't investigate the dance tradition at all. Was useful for some Orisha deity explanation.

DeMallie, R.J. (1982) *The Lakota Ghost Dance: An Ethnohistorical Account*, The Pacific Historical Review, Vol 51, No 4 pp385-405

This article quoted numerous Indian elders themselves as primary resources of information regarding the decline of the dance, as well as quoting the original historical texts recording the actions and decisions of the Government at the time.

Jilek, W.G. (1982) 'Altered states of Consciousness in North American Indian Ceremonials' *Ethos*, Vol 10, No 4, pp 326-343

Jilek was most useful for providing outlines and definitions of the trance state, especially in relation to the Plains Indians. He quoted other authorities to back up his arguments and investigated in depth the elements employed in the vision trance states.

Jorgensen, J.G. (1972) *The Sun Dance Religion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago

This book was of immense assistance as it provided an in-depth analysis of the Sun Dance religion in both its historical and more modern contexts. Undertaken as University ethno-research, the author was also employed by the Northern Ute tribe and has been involved with the Indian people since 1958. His works have been vetted by the tribes people themselves who have contributed much of the primary research.

Lefever, H.G. (1996) *When the saints Go Riding In: Santeria in Cuba and the United States*, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Vol 35, No 3 pp 318-330

This article was of particular use to me as it provided an historical overview of the Yoruba people and the dissemination of the religion from the time of the slave trade. It opened my understanding to the hermeneutics of the syncretisation of Santeria under hegemonic cultural influences.

Lincoln, B. (1994) *A Lakota Sun Dance and the Problematics of Sociocosmic Reunion*, *History of Religions*, Vol 34, No 1 pp 1-14

Lincoln presents the Lakota Sun Dance in a present day context, examining the transformation of a traditional culture and changing social elements in a contemporary milieu.

Lum, K.A. (2000) Praising His Name in the Dance *'Spirit Possession in the Spiritual Baptist Faith and Orisha Work in Trinidad, West Indies* Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam

Lum investigated spirit possession in a number of cultures and I found his work specifically on the Orishas a little thin. His descriptions of the *mounted* state far surpassed other writings that I had come across.

Namba, W.J. and Fridman, E.J.N. (2004) *'Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices and Culture'* *Trance Dance* Vol p247-255

Their work on definitions for trance state was most important in providing a framework from which to draw common elements for each of the two cultures.

National Association of Yoruba Descendants in North America,

<http://www.yorubanation.org/Yoruba.htm> (accessed 26 October 2007)

Tart, C. (1969) Introduction – *Altered States of Consciousness* Wiley, New York

Waldherr, K. (2006) *The Book of Goddesses, A Celebration of the Divine Feminine*, HNA, New York, NY

Ward, C. (1984) *Thaipusam in Malaysia: A Psycho-Anthropological Analysis of Ritual Trance, Ceremonial Possession and Self-Mortification Practices* *Ethos*, Vol 12 no 4 p307-334

This reference was useful in that it provided a counter-argument to the community ritual worship argument that supports possession trance. It offered evidence of possession trance as a cultish practice based on egoic self-gratification and power tripping.

Winkelman, M. (2004) *Shamanism as the Original Neurotheology* *Zygon*, Vol 39, No. 1

The neurotheology aspects of brain function in relation to trance states are important and Winkelman is highly acknowledged in this field, but that was the only relevance to this paper.