

Dance & Symbol: The Goddess in the Dance

Each dance transmits a specific and valuable meaning in a nonverbal language of danced patterns and symbols which is subtle, precise and sophisticated.

The intelligence, relevance and power of women's wisdom is no less for having been codified and passed down in unwritten ways.

Each time we form a circle to recreate these patterns and the information they contain, we help re-weave an ancient fabric or field of archetypal energy which carries the age-old values of community, sustainability, partnership, celebration and reverence for nature, so acutely needed in our world today.

From the article Dance as Text, © 2006 by Laura Shannon

A symbol is a nonverbal sign which encodes and transmits meaning on many levels simultaneously, also in our unconscious. Diverse interpretations are possible, so that individual seekers can approach the symbol in their own way and find meaning in its different aspects. Unconfined by the limitations of words, all of these interpretations can comfortably coexist. In this way symbols give us the gift of spiritual meaning without dogma.

One of the key symbols I have identified in the women's ritual dances I have been researching for thirty years is the symbol of the Goddess. In this article I would like to tell the story of how I found Her, alive and encoded in traditional dance.

I first encountered Sacred Dance at the Findhorn Community in 1985, thirty years ago this year. It quickly became important in my life. As I ventured further with it, I naturally sought to integrate Sacred Dance with the other types of movement which were already important to me: international folk dance; Dance Movement Therapy; women's Middle Eastern dance; and women's spirituality circles.

Seeking to weave these five threads together into one whole cloth, I found myself looking beyond the plethora of modern choreographed dances in the Sacred Dance repertoire and searching for traditional dances of a certain type. Though at the beginning of my search, I could not have articulated consciously what exactly I was seeking, with hindsight I can see that I was looking for dances which were ancient and authentic; which encouraged women's empowerment; which had a ritual purpose, meaning they served an aim beyond the immediate moment; and which had a therapeutic quality, both in their original context and for dancers today.

The dances which best fulfilled these criteria turned out to belong to the three-measure dance family. Thirty years ago, of course there were three-measure dances in both the folk and circle dance scenes in the USA and the UK, but they were taught as if they were completely distinct from one another. Apart from the odd passing remark, I never heard anyone acknowledge the similarities among them, still less articulate the significance of those similarities. And I had to find out for myself that three-measure dances actually make up the majority of East European folk dances in their original context. Discovering the overwhelming ubiquitousness of the three-measure dance pattern, and how people of all ethnic, religious, social and geographic groups have versions of these dances in common, was the first great epiphany I had in connection with my quest.¹

This then led to the question: what does the three-measure dance pattern *mean*? What if it is not only a pattern, but also a symbol? If it is encoding and transmitting nonverbal information, what might that message be?

These were, of course, the days before the internet. I had pored over folk costumes and embroideries in many books and museums and at the Koprivshtitsa Festival, and had wondered about the connections between the two nonverbal art forms, dance and embroidery. As these were inevitably practiced with great attention and devotion *by the same women*, I was certain there had to be a link. Through studying the ever-present textile motif of the Tree of Life, given central place in Balkan embroideries, this link eventually became visible to me, so that I saw the three-measure pattern as a danced expression of the Tree of Life. It was in an intense practice session with the three-measure dance Jeni Jol, one of the first dances I brought from the folk dance world into the circle dance network, that I had this second epiphany.

Then it was as if I saw before me two alphabets: the dance pattern and the textile pattern, both saying the same thing, ‘the Tree of Life’, over and over – but what, in turn, was its deeper meaning? I needed a third language in order to crack this Rosetta Stone.

My involvement in the women’s spirituality network had already led me to the work of Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler, whose (then newly-released) books provided archaeological evidence of a common matrilineal culture uniting prehistoric Europe and the Near East. These earliest civilizations honoured God the Mother, the cosmic Goddess of creation, for thousands of years before the socio-economic switch to

¹ See my 1996 article ‘Simple Dances: Where Do They Come From, Where Do They Lead?’

ideas of a punitive, warlike father god, through the wide geographical area which Gimbutas termed Old Europe. This vast region is where the Goddess was once revered; where Tree of Life embroideries are most prevalent; and where circle dances once thrived and still survive, with the three-measure dance family foremost among them.

I believe that the women still remember. Once I saw just how often the embroidered Tree of Life also resembles a Goddess, I realised that this connection is neither accidental or coincidental; truly, the Goddess has remained present, if skillfully disguised, throughout history. She is the key symbol encoded in countless variations on both embroidery motifs and the three-measure dance pattern, both of which I view as nonverbal mantras repeating, over and over, her nameless Name. Seeing and understanding this historical, spiritual, cultural and artistic link to the Goddess was my third epiphany, the one that helped me crack the code.²

My subsequent research into related areas including archaeological finds, texts of the dance songs, myths and legends such as those of the nymphs and muses, and folk customs which accompany the dances, has provided abundant material which lends weight to my case for the Goddess in dance. Those who have danced with me, done my 2-year trainings or read some of my previous articles will be familiar with my ideas on this subject.³

The early Goddess cultures identified by Gimbutas and others share a common body of core values: community, sustainability, inclusiveness, empathy, creativity, and reverence for the earth. These values create a culture based on partnership, belonging and cooperation, rather than on hierarchy, domination and competition. And here is why the link to the ancient Goddess is so important for us today: these are exactly the values we rediscover in the dance. As we practice them over and over in the circle, so we bring them into being in our lives and through us to others. I believe the purpose of traditional dance goes beyond the fleeting enjoyment of the moment we dance them, because actually – if we do them right – they train us to build a society of peace, beginning with ourselves.

The more I dance traditional dances, the more I decode the symbolic alphabets embedded in them by our dancing ancestors, the more I am convinced that they are consciously sending a message down through the generations. Again, this message is

² See my 1999 article 'Dances of the Great Mother: Three-Measure Dances and the Tree of Life'

³ See, for instance, my articles 'The Goddess Lives! Sacred Dance in Bulgaria' (2005), 'Dancing in the Footsteps of the Muses: Traditional Ritual Dances of Mount Olympus' (2014), 'Tanz gibt uns Flügel (2014)' and many more.

nonverbal, so transcends any one attempt to explicate it, but it is something to do with keeping these ancient values alive. To serve something stronger than ourselves - the spirit of the dance - is to serve the spirit of true community, which rests on the hope that the links which unite the members of the human family will prove stronger than all that seeks to divide.

Meditation of any lineage teaches that sacred symbols can be 'activated' by certain practices, releasing the energy within them for healing, insight and spiritual growth. I believe that traditional dances once served as ritual practices to facilitate this activation, and that the body of dances and related customs constitutes a mystery school which consciously transmits certain information and specific threads of ancient wisdom.⁴ My experience has shown that the dances can still serve this purpose. As we dance, both women and men, we activate the living symbol of God the Mother and the culture of partnership she represents. Now is the time to cultivate again the community ethic based on cooperation, compassion and the simple truth of the golden rule, and to foster a culture of peace in which everyone benefits. There is nothing our world needs more.

Laura Shannon © 2015

⁴ See my 2013 article 'Sacred Dance und traditionelle Frauentänze: Mysterienschule der Frauen'