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TRIBAL RITES

THE LIFE OF STONE AGE MAN

We start our explorations of dance as far back as we can go, with the life of early man in preliterate, Stone Age tribal societies. Wasn't the Stone Age tens of thousands of years ago? How then can we know about the customs of people who left no written records and particularly about dance, which is the most transitory of activities? The answer is that Stone Age culture is not strictly a chronological classification. Rather, it is one based on methods, skills, and social arrangements. Therefore, when nineteenth-century anthropologists found the same tools and methods of hunting and cultivation that led them to classify Stone Age man in the first place, they figured that Stone Age tribes were still around. They assumed that in the distant past, tribal life had the same characteristics that they saw among Native American tribal groups, Aborigines in Australia, tribal groups of the Amazonian rain forests, and certain African peoples.

The argument makes sense up to a point. However, there are problems. First of all, with increasing speed, tribal cultures have been disappearing. Tribal peoples adapted to the customs of technologically more advanced peoples, and also, conquerors forced them to change. Second, the nineteenth-century anthropologists who provided the bulk of our accounts of tribal ritual repeatedly noted the presence of dance, but gave only the most casual references to the actual forms and movements. You have probably noticed that even experienced dance critics find it difficult to describe dance in words. These anthropologists had no training in our art form. Additionally, they were often prejudiced against the dancing they saw.
As Roderyk Lange wrote in *The Nature of Dance, An Anthropological Perspective*, these early scholars mentioned dances from all over the world:

only in conjunction with customs and music. Dances appeared to many of them as very “exotic,” “wild” and “indecent.” Sometimes they explained them as manifestations of lower developed peoples. The “civilised” [sic] observers themselves would never have dreamt of performing such uninhibited movements.

However, if we keep certain reservations in mind, we can accept the eyewitness accounts of anthropologists, missionaries, and travellers as our sources for tribal life from the distant past. Fortunately, we also have as witnesses contemporary men and women who are trained observers of dance. Their reports do seem to confirm in essence what the others have said.

**Ritual**

From the beginning, we are struck by the fact that our subject looms large. Dance is a feature of every significant occasion and event crucial to tribal existence as part of ritual. The first thing to emphasize is that early dance exists as a ritual element. It does not stand alone as a separate activity or profession. For an understanding of tribal dance, therefore it is necessary to begin with the phenomenon of ritual.

*Rituals* are traditional clusters of actions. Their function is to cast powerful magic spells to placate and influence gods and spirits. Complicated rituals, passed along from one generation to the next, are practiced in every tribe to influence the future. They are performed in connection with fertility, initiation, hunting, healing, death, and war. They may last for hours, even days.

There is no clear separation in tribal societies between religion and government and art; between tilling the soil and magic; between illness, health, and superstition. All these areas cross over and touch one another. In any survey of tribal customs, you will find traces of the arts of dance and music, as well as drama, poetry, and painting (on bodies and on the walls of caves), rubbing shoulders with elements of worship, social mores, laws, medicine—and indeed most aspects of more advanced civilizations. All of these cultural patterns are observed in tribal rituals. In other words, tribal ritual is equivalent to what we call *social organization*. It is the form in which tribal groups respond to the business of living.

Rituals may be specific or cyclical. A specific ritual has a particular, one-time purpose. A cyclical, or general, ritual is repeated at the same time each year or season. A specific ritual may be devised to cure a person of ulcers, to expel an evil spirit from a person or a hut, or to mourn a death and prepare a proper burial. forest, away from the village his madness.

For descriptions of ritual, however, the accounts of anthropologists are infinitely varied. Every aspect of life, they show that because systems and histories in fearful ritual are so interwoven. The every aspect of life, they show that because systems and histories in fearful ritual are so interwoven.

**Fertility Rituals.** The remained(1) fertility. Without it perish. This gives utmost in ty of the soil and of the human or absence of rain. Thus the rituals to promote fertility. They powers by casting spells of population, agriculture, and the lengthening and shortening the waxing and waning of and the patterns of plant and slumbering in the winter and growing before the life by reproducing the need between rituals of human the hunt.

In agricultural communities the times of sowing and plowing crops to fail? How can the people? So they do their best to to buy their favor. Rain does power to promote fertility. Rain is for crops. Charms to peoples.

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forest, away from the village, and told not to return and afflict others with
his madness.

For descriptions of rituals, we turn now to written accounts. The litera-
ture shows that because so many communities developed their belief sys-
tems and histories in fearful isolation from their neighbors, the details of
ritual are infinitely varied. In addition, because rituals are concerned with
every aspect of life, they do not fit easily into categories. Nevertheless,
there are common elements that appear frequently enough to be consid-
ered characteristic. In order to get a general idea of the nature of tribal ritu-
al, we will focus on their content, considering examples of rituals grouped
according to their purpose.

Fertility Rituals. The most basic concern of early man was (and
remains!) fertility. Without food, or without new offspring, the tribe would
perish. This gives utmost importance to the cycle of the seasons, the fertili-
ty of the soil and of the human and animal populations, and the abundance
or absence of rain. Thus the community's most important efforts go into rit-
uals to promote fertility. Their aim is to influence various supernatural
powers by casting spells on the gods and spirits in charge of the animal
population, agriculture, and childbearing.

These rituals follow a cyclical pattern, parallel to the repetitive
rhythms that are such a direct part of experience: the recurrence of the sea-
sons with their wet and dry or cold and hot weather; the cycles of the sun;
the lengthening and shortening of days; the alternation of day and night;
the waxing and waning of the moon; the sowing and harvesting of food;
and the patterns of plant and animal life that are echoed in man's. As seeds
slumbering in the winter soil sprout again in the spring, so individuals are
born and grow. Before they decline and die, they assure the continuity of
life by reproducing the next generation. Thus there is a close connection
between rituals of human fertility and those of funerals, agriculture, and
the hunt.

In agricultural communities, the greatest anxieties are connected with
the times of sowing and planting. What will happen between now and the
harvest? Will malicious spirits blacken the sun, withhold the rain, cause the
crops to fail? How can the tribal leaders get the spirits to look kindly on
them? So they do their best, each tribe devising rituals to appease the gods:
ceremonies to demonstrate the desired outcome of fertility and abundant
growth; magic spells to force the spirits to perform properly; sacrificial gifts
to buy their favor. Rain dances are a prime example of ritual as magic
power to promote fertility. The gardeners among you know how important
rain is for crops. Charms to bring rain are found everywhere among tribal
peoples.

In general, the times of most intense, prayerful activity are bound up
with fertility and the regeneration of life. Because fertility is so fraught with meaning, and there are so many aspects of existence associated with it, we find endless variations on our old friend, the spring ritual. As Lois Ellfeldt wrote in Dance From Magic to Art:

The solar seasons are important in the calendar of celebrations of all planting cultures. . . . Winter is the season of the dead, with its sleep and rebirth with the sun. . . . Rather than take a chance on the return of spring, with its renewed life, there are rites to insure this. There are literally thousands of forms, but the essence is in sacrifice.

The people of Bengal perform these rituals at the time of planting the rice crop. Boys and girls of a Munda village go to the forest and cut a young Karma tree. Singing, dancing, and beating drums, they carry the tree and plant it in the middle of a special dancing ground. They decorate its branches with colored cloth and plaited straw jewelry, offer it a sacrifice, and with linked arms dance in a great circle around the tree. As preparation for this festival, the daughters of the village headmen have already cultivated fast-sprouting barley blades, which they bring to this same spot, and place them with reverence at the foot of the small tree. The ritual is then concluded with the tree being uprooted and thrown into a stream.

When you hear that the Mundas believe the gods of the forest are responsible for crops, the idea behind these actions becomes clear. The tree spirits have been reminded by the example of the fast-growing barley blades to do the right thing, that is, to quicken the growth of the rice crop. Submerging the tree in water acts as a rain charm.

The circle form, present in tribal ritual, Asiatic religious ceremonies, and folk dancing, is also common in our art dance. As Curt Sachs points out, the circle takes on a spiritual significance:

This is not the result of a development of understanding but rather of the connection between an idea and its motor reflex—to encircle an object is to take it into possession, to incorporate it.

Therefore, magic powers are most often tapped through rhythmic motion within a circle. And this circle often turns around something—a fire, a pit, a post, or a person. Mysticism aside, we can see how in a more obvious psychological way the circle creates a community. It enables you to face everybody at once, and to define a space. This also allows you to tell secrets and be part of an in-group, and to keep out the enemy. We see the circle form in initiation ceremonies in East Africa where the Wayao circle a fire during the circumcision of youths, and among the California Indians who dance around a newly matured girl.

Initiation Rituals. Close boys and girls, as they reach western Transvaal, boys and adulthood. Before the cutti towards the east. The idea is a man. During the initiation, around the fire. A California dance forward and backward the east. The east, the direct while the west is the direction made of an animal's hoof.

Rituals of the Hunt and fertility of the soil appear in different forms where hunting affinity between man and the when he uses animals for their spirits to protect him. A The dancer wins power over entice him within killing ran a new fishing net, thereby catch. African Pygmies celebrate the animal on the structure. The search, closing in on the elepahrs.

Healing and Funeral R
bers are obviously of utmost priors, priests, and the entiti Healing rites are found eve (we also call him the witch d esting to note that the sham person in the center of the around until they overpower

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**Initiation Rituals.** Close to rites of fertility are rites of *initiation* for boys and girls, as they reach the age of puberty. Among the Sotho in northwestern Transvaal, boys undergo circumcision as part of their initiation to adulthood. Before the cutting, novices sit facing the west—afterward, towards the east. The idea is that the immature boy dies and reawakens as a man. During the initiation, the adult men of the East African Wayao circle around the fire. A California Indian maiden, at her first menstruation, must dance forward and backward, at all times keeping her face turned toward the east. The east, the direction of the rising sun, is the direction of life, while the west is the direction of the dead. As she dances, she swings a ratt­tle made of an animal's hoof (this relates to a hunting charm).

**Rituals of the Hunt and of Animals.** Just as the rituals of spring and fertility of the soil appear in planting cultures, similar impulses give rise to different forms where hunting and fishing provide food. There is a natural affinity between man and the animal populations in his environment. Even when he uses animals for food, he respects their life form, and may call on their spirits to protect them. An animal dance may serve as a hunting charm. The dancer wins power over the animal he imitates, and will be able to entice him within killing range. Or, specific ritual may be devised to make a new fishing net, thereby creating proper conditions that ensure a good catch. African Pygmies celebrate an elephant kill by building a huge wooden framework to represent the elephant, and pinning the tail of the slain animal on the structure. Then to a beating drum, the hunters reenact their search, closing in on the elephant, and finally plunging attacks with their spears.

**Healing and Funeral Rituals.** The health and strength of tribal mem­bers are obviously of utmost importance. When illness strikes, witch doc­tors, priests, and the entire community practice *magical healing rites.* Healing rites are found everywhere. When someone is sick, the shaman, (we also call him the witch doctor or the medicine man, although it is inter­esting to note that the shaman is often an elderly woman) places the sick person in the center of the magic circle and leads a chorus in dancing around until they overpower and chase away the evil spirit of sickness.

You may have picked up a connection between tribal healing rituals and modern-day practices. Since the 1940s in this country, various people have felt the healing power of dance (and other arts) on some forms of ill­ness, to the point where there is now a large American Dance Therapy Association, and in our society, dance therapy is a recognized profession, although its recognition is not wholehearted in all circles. In tribes of course, there was never any question.

When a Senegalese is dangerously ill, a devil dancer is called in. He
makes offerings to the devils, and dancing in the masks appropriate to them, conjures the demons of disease, one after the other, out of the sick man's body and into his own. The idea is that because it is possible to shift a load of wood or stones from our own back to the back of another, it is equally possible to shift the burden of pains and sorrows onto another. This is what the Senegalese devil dancer did when he took the demons of illness into himself. Curt Sachs comments:

Having thus successfully extracted the cause of the malady, the artful dancer lies down on a bier, shamming death. He is carried to an open place outside the village. Here, being left to himself, he soon comes to life again, and has­tens back to claim his reward.

Malvina Hoffman, a sculptor who travelled the world to find models for the Hall of Man exhibit at the Chicago Field Museum, describes this healing ritual among the Ainu of Japan in *Heads and Tales*:

They feel that illness is the possession of the body by demons. These demons hate certain smells, so the Ainu medicine—man seeks out what will be most odious to their sense of smell. Certain wildflowers (one of them is the convul­vus root) are chewed and then spat out over the unfortunate invalid. The "doctors" rush about howling and spitting this evil-smelling root, waving swords, and generally doing their best to terrorize the demons of disease, and I should think scare the patient into a state of collapse. The result must often be successful, for the custom persists, and this form of exorcism is resorted to repeatedly all over the globe.

When healing rituals fail, and death results, there is a funeral. For obvious reasons, *Funeral rituals* may include activities to stimulate fertility. At funerals, dancers of the Pangwe of Cameroon must whirl their loin cloths in the air to expose their genitals; from the same impulse, at the death of a girl on the Island of Yap, women throw their grass skirts in the air to show their private parts. When a chieftain of Yap dies, the dancers who follow his body engage in passionate sexual motions.

**War and Weapons Rituals.** Although there are many ritual themes that we haven't considered, we will look at only one more major kind: Curt Sachs says, "The weapon dance is extremely widespread: handling a weapon is still man's favorite sport." (These words were written in the thirties. If anything, they are truer today than they were then.) In New Ireland, the dancers, each holding a battle spear, form a double row. Their bodies are in continuous motion, legs and feet make quick tripping motions from side to side, forward and backward. Meanwhile, spears are swung and thrust against invisible opponents. These movements, having been rehearsed with great care, are executed simultaneously by all.

Other Ritual Elements Fe

Up to now we have tak

One such element is *sounds* and singing. The drummer is felt that the gods speak through the drummers in a clear voice, dance, sing, clap, and stamp the forms. The first drums we hear are the drummers carrying the dance. The drums may be accompanied—as well as *Body decorations* may be feathered or grass costumes up for faces or bodies. A tiki, the mask, is associated with the sacred chariot of the dead, and in the south are used by the dancers to制造业 new skins are provided for clothing. At various times a Reed flute was added accompaniment—as well as *Body decorations* may be feathered or grass costumes up for faces or bodies. A tiki, the mask, is associated with the sacred chariot of the dead, and in the south are used by the dancers to制造业 new skins are provided for clothing. At various times a Reed flute was added.

And how much more with tribal man, that the you with the spirit that the mask by itself is a fearsome power is the mask. The dance is a masquerade. You can mask on a spectator. Thin Perhaps you've been at a M Halloween. As in any strike your familiar self. It hides might not otherwise do. We able to take part in the lynching in their everyday faces? And how much more with tribal man, that the you with the spirit that the mask by itself is a fearsome power is the mask. The dance is a masquerade. You can mask on a spectator. Thin Perhaps you've been at a M Halloween. As in any strike your familiar self. It hides might not otherwise do. We able to take part in the lynching in their everyday faces? And how much more with tribal man, that the you with the spirit that the mask by itself is a fearsome power is the mask. The dance is a masquerade. You can mask on a spectator. Thin Perhaps you've been at a M Halloween. As in any strike your familiar self. It hides might not otherwise do. We able to take part in the lynching in their everyday faces? And how much more with tribal man, that the you with the spirit that the mask by itself is a fearsome power is the mask. The dance is a masquerade. You can mask on a spectator. Thin Perhaps you've been at a M Halloween. As in any strike your familiar self. It hides might not otherwise do. We able to take part in the lynching in their everyday faces? And how much more with tribal man, that the you with the spirit that the mask by itself is a fearsome power is the mask. The dance is a masquerade. You can mask on a spectator. Thin Perhaps you've been at a M Halloween. As in any strike your familiar self. It hides might not otherwise do. We able to take part in the lynching in their everyday faces?
Other Ritual Elements Found in Dance

Up to now we have taken note of rituals that include movement. Now let us consider other ritual elements that are also found in the dance art. One such element is sounds. These may include drum beating, chanting, and singing. The drummer is the main music maker in a tribe; and since it is felt that the gods speak through drums, both the man and the instrument are associated with the sacred. The most common ritual arrangement has the drummers in a clearing; the dancers face the drummers while they dance, sing, clap, and stamp; and the tribe forms a circle around the performers. The first drums were animal skins stretched over cooking pots, or across the ends of a hollow tree trunk. Drumsticks were cooking spoons. To honor their sacred character, many rituals are observed in connection with manufacturing the drums. For example, among the Lotuko, when new skins are provided for drums, the men do a dance wearing women's clothing. At various times and places, rattling instruments, bone whistles, and reed flutes were added to drums, and you had the beginnings of accompaniment—as well as that of the jazz band!

Body decorations may include the adornment of the body with masks, feathered or grass costumes, colored stones and shells, and painted makeup for faces or bodies. A common element used in summoning magic power is the mask. The dancer assumes a special supernatural identity with a mask or headdress. You know from watching horror films the effect of a mask on a spectator. Think for a moment of the effect on the wearer. Perhaps you've been at a Mardi Gras, or a masquerade, or worn a mask on Halloween. As in any striking costume, you feel different, removed from your familiar self. The mask enables you to do things you might not otherwise do. Would ordinary southern businessmen have been able to take part in the lynching of black men if they had to face one another in their everyday faces?

And how much more does donning a mask affect you if you believed, with tribal man, that the mask changes your actual identity and merges you with the spirit that the mask represents? Among the Dogon tribe, the mask by itself is a fearsome object, attracting great magical force. It is dangerous to the very men who make it, and for protection before and during their wood carving, they perform sacrifices and obey strict rules. Thus the masked dancer, becoming one with tribal ancestors, or with good or evil spirits, is powerful indeed.

The setting involves going to a particular place, like another village or a clearing in the woods, or a cave, or a sick person's hut. Preparation for the ritual may include decorating the place. A bower may be erected in the clearing or on a cave wall. Finally, an element common to both ritual and dance is fire. It is a given that before the invention of electricity, fire was present at all nighttime ceremonies to provide light. However, fire also
serves other purposes. It may be used for sacrifice, or as a focal point to
dance around, or to carry in the form of torches. Fire is very much a part of
modern ritual. You may or may not have attended a candlelight proces­sion, whether at an initiation into a club, or a memorial service. But you
have certainly sat at a campfire and felt the awesome attraction of its danc­ing flames.

Crossover Rituals. In this chapter, I have offered you a number of
types and examples of rituals and ceremonies. Under each type, you will
find activities that could just as well have been put into a different classifi­cation, since all the traditional motifs of tribal dance are creatively com­bined in ever-new relationships. You have already been warned that a sub­ject as broad as world dance is not easy to pin down. However, since our
methods of study—and certainly our books—are constructed in a linear
fashion, we are stuck with the necessity for drawing lines, often in a rather
arbitrary manner. Anthropologists sometimes use the term crossover rituals
to deal with this problem. Actually, it is a rare ritual that does not cross
over.

For example, we see crossover rituals in the many vegetation rituals
that begin with the idea of human fertility. In other dances, moments of
sexual intercourse are brought into the dance and combined artistically
with it. The weapon dance crosses over to fertility rites. There is a very
ancient relationship between battle dance and love dance, which we see in
the deep significance of the weapon dance when it is performed at sowing
and reaping, girls’ rites, weddings, and funerals. The same actions may
have a number of purposes. Flagellation and stamp dances (beating on the
earth) occur in initiation rituals, at funeral dances, as rain charms, and in
fertility rituals, and so on. Now that you have a clear concept of ritual in
the life of tribal man, we will look more closely at the dance itself, as it was
and is found in ritual.

Questions for Review

1. Think of a private ritual you attended with friends or family. What
   similarities can you find with tribal rituals?

2. Can you think of a public political ritual which took place recently?
   Discuss the elements that were present.