

## **Spirit of the Dance**

By Karen Kelly

In many traditional societies the shaman acts as an intermediary between the world of the spirits and the world of man. She journeys into the Spirit World, interacts with its inhabitants and brings back its gifts and healing. In this way the shaman acts as a bridge between the two worlds.

Tools that can help to manifest in a physical way the gifts she carries from the spirits are clearly important: such tools include the creation of power objects, song and story and of course dance. Dance is also used in many places to give direct access to the spirits to non-shamans either by bringing them into the spirit world or by bringing the spirits to inhabit the dancer's own body.

The following article looks at some of the ways traditional shamans have used dance and how we can use it today as part of our own interaction with the world of the spirits.

### **THE BRINGER OF ECSTASY**

Eliade, in his classic book, describes shamanism as an archaic technique of ecstasy, which in this sense means leaving the body (ex stasis - out of the physical). There are many, many ways that shamans have used to enter that ecstatic state, however dance is one of the more common methods used in places from Europe to Northern America to South East Asia. The !Kung Bushmen of Southern Africa use dance to heal. In an ecstatic state, supported by song and by rhythmic clapping the dancers call up a healing power called !num. The power or energy comes to the dancers as a boiling heat. They say that though initially the dance is agony it also makes their hearts happy.

Similar examples of using dance to enter a shamanic state of consciousness can be found in the stories of the Tarantella in Medieval Europe and even in the present day work of Gabrielle Roth, who has developed the five rhythms as a way of working with ecstatic energy.

Often the power is described as hard to work with at first and the dancers have little control. Those dancing the Tarantella were often described as shaking and trembling as though ill. Among the !Kung Bushmen the new dancers need the support of the spirits and of more experienced dancers to help them learn to mediate the energy.

Shamans also use dance as a way of embodying their spirit helpers, to call up the power of those spirits, and connect with it in ordinary reality. The writer and shamanic practitioner Michael Harner recommends that shamanic practitioners dance with their power animal on a regular basis to help to keep that sense of connection strong. This is done in a straightforward way by simply rattling for a few

minutes to shift consciousness, then calling out to the power animal and asking it come and dance with you and finally, shaking the rattles to keep in a shamanic state of consciousness, dancing with that spirit.

Whilst this is most commonly done in connection to animal spirits, you might also want to try to learn the dances of other spirit helpers from trees and plants to stones and even the sun or moon.

Among the Tungus and Evenki people of Siberia where the word shaman originates, dance is also used to travel to the Upper and Lower Worlds. When the shaman wishes to travel to the Lower World he will call up his reindeer helper and in a complex dance embody the experience of journeying to the Lower World.

When she wants to visit the Upper World a bird dance is used. Pictures from the nineteenth century show Tungus shamans dancing virtually on top of their drums as they fly upwards.

A more developed form of using dance to enter non-ordinary reality can be found in accounts of shamans who dance their journeys in a kind of ecstatic performance. As they enter the spirit world they dance out the encounters they have there, the places they visit.

Among the Wana people of South East Asia complex healing journeys are embodied in dance. Dancing, a whole group of shamans will enact the journey to the Upper World in search of a sick person's soul - traveling to the House of the One God. Since the community can see what is happening to the shaman, the performance makes the experience far more real. It gives the community access to the spirit world so that in their imaginations, they too can travel with the shamans. And the shamans in turn have the benefit of the support of the community as they travel. This brings to mind a distinction in shamanic dance between ecstatic dances where the shaman is in very direct contact with the spirit world, and dance re-enactments of shamanic experiences where the shaman re-enacts the journey experience for the people. Sometimes this can be at some remove from the original shamanic experience. One example of this may be the Dream Dances of the Pomo who in dances re-enacted over and over the spirit visions that gave them power and the dances and songs taught to them in their visions. Similarly amongst the North West Coast people, during the winter dances initiates of dance societies re-enact the experiences of their vision quest.

They sing the song of their medicine helper, which could be an animal but could also be the spirit of a rock or the great cedar tree. As the community picks up the song, the dancer then begins to dance the medicine dance of that spirit helper, supported by the singing community. Some dancers become well known and their songs are known and remembered by the community so that as soon as they get up to dance the whole village is singing their song. This practice had largely ceased

in the last century, but in recent years has been re-established by teachers including Johnny Moses.

In my own practice there is a difference between the dances I do to enter the spirit world when I call and dance with my power animals and the web-healing dance I was given in a vision one night in the forest in Sweden. The former of these is a responsive physical song that passes back and forth between my power animals and myself, the latter is a ritual with a set form. If the ritual deviates wildly from that form both the patient and myself stand to be at risk from the forces released.

#### WHY DANCE?

Shamans dance to call their spirits, to heal, to seek a blessing, for thanksgiving, to meet the ancestors, to pray. It can be very moving to explore those applications. Through dance, the shaman's body is directly in touch with the spirit world, possibly the most direct bridge possible between this physical reality and that of the spirits. Dance can be used to invoke power, to call the spirits in and ask for a blessing. A few years ago I saw an Evenki shaman dance with his spirits, beating a drum and then drag the long mirror encrusted coat into which they had poured their blessings over the audience. The power that poured off that coat onto us was extraordinary. The !Kung bushmen use dance in a very direct way to heal. As the power comes to them, the dancers are at first in agony, but gradually they come into harmony with that power. They then move over to the sick people and transfer that energy to them as healing. Often this can be very physical with them massaging the sick people or rubbing their sweat into them.

In a previous issue of Sacred Hoop, Jonathan Horwitz wrote of his own experiences at the Acorn Festival of the Pomo<sup>2</sup>. In this festival Big Head masked dancers dance in order to thank the spirits for their harvest bounty. This use of dance as a physical prayer is a common community aspect of dance.

Possibly the best known example of dance as community prayer is the Sun Dance, still practiced by the Lakota and many other nations in North America. In these prolonged dances of several days duration, the participants remain focused on prayer. The whole dance is seen as a time of focused prayer, prayer for one's family, people, the wider community, the Earth. The dance is also a physical give-away of thanks for being alive. The seeking of personal vision is also an important part of the Sundance, as the dancers push themselves past their limits of into an altered ex-static state in which this world and the spirit world become one.

#### RITUAL AND DANCE

As we have seen with the Sun Dance, dance is often used to bring ordinary members of the community into contact with the spirits. In ritual and dance non-shamans can enter the spirit world and interact with its inhabitants or the spirits can possess ordinary human dancers and bring their power out into ordinary reality.

Perhaps because of its very physicality, dance seems to open the channels of communication to the spirits for people for whom this contact is not normally possible.

In some places specialized dance societies teach the ability to embody spirits. For example among the Zuni Pueblos of the South West, the katchina dancers bring the spirit power of the katchinas into the villages. Wearing katchina masks, the dancers become the katchinas themselves bringing the powers of corn and rain and clouds, of turquoise and change to the community. It is clear to all the community that although Uncle Joe might be involved in a ritual dance society, it is the spirit Crow Mother who is out there calling the clouds in the village square.

In these rituals the boundaries between the spirits and human beings become blurred. The dancers are both those who pray to the spirits in the dance, and that to which they pray. Indeed this experience of non-duality, of how we are not separate, but part of the Universe is something that is often a gift of dance.

Similarly on the North West Coast of America there are specialized dance societies which work with particular types of spirits. Often entry to a society is only offered to those who have a vision of the spirit involved. For example the Bear Dancers must have seen (usually on a vision quest) the spirit of Bear and in the dance they re-enact over and over the experience of that first vision. Sometimes on the North West Coast entry to such a medicine society could be highly traumatic.

This was particularly so when the spirit encountered in the forest was the hamatsa or wild cannibal spirit. In these cases the dancer was at first a danger to those around him and would try to bite them or tear at them with his fingernails. It was only once those already initiated into the society brought the dancer into harmony with the spirit, that he could openly dance and sing, and thus bring the power to the village.

One famous example of non-shaman dancers entering the spirit world through the power of their dance is the Ghost Dance. In the 1890's a shaman called Wovoka had a vision in which he was taken up to Heaven and shown a way of dancing to communicate with the Ancestors. This happened at a time when disease was rife among the Plains Indians and many of the old rituals and beliefs were being lost. In the Ghost Dance, ordinary people could cry out to their ancestors asking them to come, please and to take them away. The Ghost Dance songs recorded at the time by Mooney still hold records of that. Perhaps the most well known Ghost dance song comes from the Arapaho:

Ninaa' niahu' na  
Ninaa' niahu' na  
Bi' taa' wu ha'nai sai  
Hi' naa' thi na' niwu' huna.

I circle around  
I circle around  
The boundaries of the Earth  
Wearing my long  
wing-feathers as I fly

The dancers danced crying out these spirit songs until they saw their ancestors and fell to the ground journeying far into the Land of the Ancestors. Similar ancestral cults have been observed in other parts of the world.

It is my experience that the power and wisdom that are the gifts of the spirits are felt most strongly when they are physically experienced. If part of the role of the shaman is to embody the gifts of the spirit and to be their bridge into the human world, then perhaps he most truly does this in dancing. So I end with the thought that perhaps the shaman less walks his talk than dances it.

**Karen Kelly** is a shamanic practitioner and healer living in Cambridge. She is one of the facilitators of the London Open Drumming Group and the editor of Spirit Talk the core shamanic newsletter.