The Relationship of Trance and Dance.
Trance, Dance and Ritual: Sacred Movements in the World’s Religions.

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Harvard University
April 11, 1995
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Many years ago, at the beginning of a year’s stay in Haiti, when I had seen as yet only one or two trance ceremonies, I was walking down a steep, curving mountain path. Ahead of me, at a widening bend in the road, was a group of musicians and singers. Higher up along the path, came a woman with a heavy basket on her head. When she heard the music, she took a shortcut, practically sliding down the mountainside, and began to dance to the music. I was sure, as only a novice can be, that, seized by the music, she was possessed and was now dancing in trance. But as it turned out, she was joining in a local, spur-of-the-moment celebration and was having a good time. No possession, no trance, no ritual, no vodou!

What, then, is trance? What is possession—since I have mentioned that word? What is dance? And what, if any, is the relationship between them? The words are familiar and the answers should be simple enough. Trance and dance have much in common: both may be understood as techniques of the body. When people dance in trance, these two techniques come together, may become one. Separately and together, dance and trance are part of the symbolic world humans have created and are creating for themselves, individually and collectively. While they create this world, they also express it, modifying it over time, as conditions demand. I suggest that there are three points at which we may examine the relationship between trance and dance, when they occur in the context of religious ritual: 1) people dance to bring the spirits into their midst, 2) people dance their interactions with the spirits and, finally 3) people may dance the spirits’ departure. In the first case, from the point of view of the participants, the dance constitutes an invitation or a demand for the spirits to come. From the point of view of the observer, the dance is a technique of trance induction, though only one. There are others. The spirits then arrive and make their presence known. Again, from the perspective of the outsider, the dancer performs in trance. And finally, the third part of the sequence involves the departure of the spirits, the end of the trance. In any given cultural context one or another of these three may be given greater emphasis. You will note that I make a distinction between the participants’ understanding of the situation, and that of the observer. I believe such a double approach to be necessary: neither alone is complete or satisfactory, from my
The questions I asked at the beginning seemed simple enough, yet the answers are not. So let me start with some definitions. By "trance" I mean an Altered State of Consciousness, and that is a very loose term indeed. More technically, and without implying anything pathological or psychiatric, we may speak of a dissociational state. Such states may arise from stimulation above the range characteristic of ordinary workaday life, or, on the contrary, from stimulation below that range. An example of the one might be excitement, as at the peak of a sports event, or the other drowsiness induced by monotony, as in highway hypnosis. Such states of hyperarousal or hyparousal of the nervous system are both common and diverse. Some are ordinary, others extraordinary, perhaps even spectacular.

In spite of their diversity, they share a number of common characteristics. These include alterations of perception, sensation, memory, thought processes, in short, of consciousness. They are often followed by euphoria and heightened levels of energy.

In calling these states examples of "dissociation," I wish to draw attention to a common process that characterizes them, namely the narrowing of the focus of attention, so that most ordinary stimuli are excluded, for example sensations of pain, or even a habitual sense of self and personal identity. Trancing constitutes a universal human capacity that comes into play in numerous circumstances, from the most ordinary and quotidian to the most dramatic, ritualized and sacred. Like other universal human capacities, for example the capacity for language, or indeed for dance, it can be and always is, culturally styled and developed. In itself, it is empty of content; it does not carry a particular set of meanings. Rather, the state can be, and often is, endowed with special, heightened meanings. It acts as a vehicle for meanings supplied to it or grafted on to it. As such, it may serve the ends of both of the individual trancer and of the community that shapes and interprets the behavior and the experience. In short, trance is raw material available for cultural elaboration. As a result, it is seen in human communities in a number of different contexts. One of these is a context of religious belief and ritual, and this is the one that shall concern us here.

In a study we conducted at Ohio State in the 1960s, under a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, we examined the ethnographic literature on a worldwide sample of 488 societies. We found reports of Altered States, ritualized in a religious context, for 90% of that sample. For the remaining 10%, we couldn't be sure whether we were dealing with true absence or with reporting that, for our purposes, was insufficient. With such a large body of materials, we found ourselves in need of some...
ordering device. The one most strongly suggested by our ethnographic materials was to ask what meaning these states were linked to, how they were interpreted and how they were informed and structured by these meanings. One meaning that was very prominently associated with many of these altered states can best be termed "possession." This is a difficult term to use in cross-cultural research, because it has such a special history in Western societies. This creates the risk that the field observer may have been influenced by elements of this tradition, and, as a result, give a biased account of the beliefs of the people being studied. In most general terms, "possession" refers to the belief that a person's self, or soul, or one of multiple souls, may be displaced by some other entity, and that the words and actions observed during the trance state are those of the entity or spirit that inhabits or controls the body. The actions of the trancer are no longer seen as his or her own, but as those of the possessing or embodied entity. Such a visitation may be desired, and in the ritual context is expected to occur in response to an invitation. This is the case in the rituals of the Haitian folk-religion we commonly know as vodou. Participants speak of it simply as serving the spirits. In the Judeo-Christian, Euro-American tradition, such states are feared as demonic and require exorcisms, that is, the ritual expulsion of the entity. Because we observe an individual in trance, and are told by members of the community that this transformation of behavior is due to the takeover of the body by a visiting spirit entity, we refer to this combination of state and informing belief as Possession Trance. Other types of altered states, states informed by other sorts of beliefs, we spoke of collectively as simply "Trance". One very frequent type of belief in this second group speaks of soul absences, spirit journeys, magic flight, a series in which you will recognize the frequently encountered themes of classic shamanism. And it is this rather simple-minded distinction between Possession Trance and non-Possession Trance that will serve us as we take a closer look at trance, dance and ritual. Note that, in possession trance spirits speak THROUGH the individuals they possess, those who are in trance. In non-Possession Trance, spirits whom trancers encounter speak TO them. These encounters and conversations may be dramatically enacted, but the trancer does not embody the spirit.

Trance, then is a worldwide, virtually universal phenomenon. It has its evolutionary roots in our mammalian heritage. It may be induced intentionally by various methods or occur spontaneously as a result of a large number of different stimuli. It is ritualized in many different manners, and interpreted, given meanings, in diverse ways. For analytic purposes, it is helpful to distinguish between a psychobiological state, that is Trance, and the belief system, whether possession or soul absence or spirit encounter, to which it is linked and which structures both the behavior and the subjective experience. There is no single form of belief associated with trance; even in a single society there...
be more than one type of belief linked to ritualized types of altered state.

While we often find trance occurring in the context of a ritual in which there is both music and dance, there is one type of altered state, however, one that is linked to meditation, silence, immobility, and isolation, where we do not expect to find music or dance. The experience is private. The French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget (1985) calls such states "ecstasy". In what follows, we shall have no more to say about them.

Let me just stop to note here that "ecstasy" means "to stand outside" oneself, perhaps in the sense that one's soul is elsewhere. In English, in ordinary parlance, one can also be besides oneself, perhaps with fear or rage. In German, you can jump out of your skin: "aus der Haut fahren." In everyday life, as in religion, we can be enthusiastic, a word that refers to being "god filled." When someone acts strangely, we may ask what got into him? What I mean to suggest by these examples, is that the language of our everyday lives carries with it reminiscences of ideas both of soul absence and of possession, even if their profound and anciently ritualized meanings are largely forgotten.

Before we turn to a discussion of some examples of possession trance and non-possession trance, we need to stop briefly to deal with the other term of my title, namely dance. This, too, turns out to be a complex matter, as those of you who have followed this series of lectures well know. I draw here on the ethnographic study of dance, primarily the work of anthropologists who have studied dance in many different cultural traditions and settings. Here the consensus seems to be that it is difficult to define dance in any absolute sense. Dance can be spoken of as a structured system of human movement (A. Kaeppler), and in any given society it will be only one of several such movement systems. Judith Lynn Hanna (1979:19) specifies that this behavior is intentionally rhythmical. She also includes an aesthetic element as part of her definition of dance.

As outsiders we may be struck by behavior that seems to us to fit our sense of "dance", yet it may not fit any such category in the local view. More importantly, rhythmic movement, in association with music--another difficult concept and one I shall not attempt to define here--occurs frequently in the context of rituals in which we observe either Possession Trance or non-Possession Trance. However, dance, in that sense, never covers the whole field. That is, the ritual, in its entirety, is likely to include movements other than those we might wish to speak of as dance. It is then only one of several structured movement systems we observe in the course of the ritual event. Similarly, at any given time only some of those present and participating will be in the trance state appropriate to the occasion. Some, perhaps most, will not
find themselves in an altered state of consciousness.

There is another aspect of dance of significance here. As an ordered movement system it may be seen, at least sometimes, as imposing structure on potentially incoherent or apparently random movements of a dissociated person. By enacting a spirit personality, or an encounter with spirits through the medium of dance, a shape is imposed on the trancer's actions, a focus is provided, a theme is shared with an audience, which consists both of other participants, some perhaps themselves in trance, and of spectators. Dance, among other things, is a powerful means of control, as well as of expression and communication.

To understand the relationship between trance and dance we need to remember that, as Marcel Mauss (1950) observed a long time ago, people in different cultures move differently. And this is reflected in dance, whether secular or sacred. Alan Lomax et al. (1968), who tested these differences by looking at hundreds of hours of film from all parts of the world, distinguished a "one-unit body attitude" typical of Eurasia and native North America, and a "two-unit body attitude" centered in Sub-Saharan Africa. Differences in characteristic movement patterns include, or are related to, such obvious aspects of life as the typical motions of work. For example, Haitian women, from childhood, carry loads, often heavy loads, on their heads (slides 1, 2). We may see this as giving them a particularly graceful, straight-backed posture (slide 3). Another factor influencing dance movements may be a group's attitude toward the body in general and to sexuality more particularly. Compare Irish clog dancing, with a straight trunk and unmoving arms, to African-American tap dancing, where the same or similar foot movements are linked to an active and mobile body. In trancing behavior, where relations to, and conceptions of, spirit entities come into play, dance reflects both a group's typical movement patterns and behavior appropriate to a relationship with particular spirits or indeed expressing the characteristics of the spirits themselves. For example, a fierce male spirit is represented, as here in Brazilian candomblé, by movements and facial expressions presenting that very characteristic of fierceness (slide 4) and maleness. The female body now enacts a vigorous male personality. Of course, dance movements are only one part of that self-presentation. Facial expression, clothing, accoutrements, and accessories are all part of the picture. And so is the music, the behavior of the other participants in the ritual, what precedes and what follows this particular scene, the physical context in which these events take place, the light, the time of day or night, the smells and sounds, the presence of food and drink, and so forth. To appreciate what goes on here we need, as much as possible the "total" context. I put "total" in quotation marks since this is an aim never to be achieved. Note, furthermore, that your selective perception, as an outsider, will be drawn to, among other things, some elements in the scene that might be of only marginal interest to the local participants, whereas you might miss elements that are of major
significance to them. They bring their entire life experience to this scene, a life experience that is likely to be different in important aspects from your own. In this painting by the Haitian artist Wilson Bigaud (slide 5) we see what is going on in a vodou ritual from the point of view of a participant, of someone raised in this particular cultural tradition. Note that the drummers and the dancer are only one element in a much larger presentation. The scene itself includes elements that actually occur at different times, yet the artist has chosen to represent them as occurring simultaneously, attempting to give us "the whole picture." He has even chosen to remove one of the walls of the house, so we can see what goes on inside. The large snake in the tree stands for the snake spirit Damballah, offerings for whom may have to be placed in a tree. When possessed by this spirit, a trancer may attempt to climb into trees as well as to dive into pools of water. Inspite of this realistic appearing depiction, it should be noted that snakes of such impressive size constitute a memory of Africa. They do not exist in Haiti. In the ritual snake spirits are also represented by ground drawings, called veve (slide 6). These snakes come in pairs; they represent the rainbow. Eggs are their favorite food. But to return to Bigaud's painting: Much of the scene, as you will have noted, deals with cooking and offerings of food, and preparations of food for eventual feasting not only by the gods but by humans, men and women, as well. In Haiti, it is not surprising that spirits as well as humans are often hungry. We do not see much of the dance; the fact that the dancer is unsteady on her feet shows a typical entry into trance. The initial experience of trance is often dizziness while dancing. Assurance of support from others who are not in trance provides the secure environment necessary for letting go, for abandoning oneself to the spirits. Here are some examples of "falling to the drums" from the Yoruba of Nigeria and from several different Afro-Brazilian religions (slides 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). Such falling and receiving support is also part of the trance dance ritual among the !Kung. Here it occurs among men, who are healers, and who sometimes run out into the night to meet their spirits (slides 11, 12). They are not possessed and do not act out spirit roles. You may recognize this behavior as similar to being "slain by the Spirit" or "resting in the Spirit" among Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians in this country. In the Christian context the sacred swoon may involve only a brief clouding of consciousness. It is not part of a dance sequence. In possession trance rituals, as in Haiti, it is more likely to mark a break between the initial ritual dance and the enacting of spirit personalities, some of which also involves dancing. In Haiti, and elsewhere, the dancer regains control, or rather, the spirit then takes control, and the dance proceeds appropriately.

This temporary loss of control, experienced as dizziness or vertigo, is perhaps the most widespread and characteristic feature of trance rituals. Where it is preceded by dance, this typically involves rotational movement, whirling or twirling. The position
particularly in the context of expectation and suggestion, may be subjectively experienced as loss of control, a loosening of the connection between body and soul, and thus preparing the individual to experience a takeover by another entity or force. In this way, the individual is readied for a personal transformation. In possession trance, this means, in effect, becoming another, if only temporarily. In the case of the !Kung, this involves empowerment for healing and for spirit encounters. In the Christian context, there may be healing and conversion, a form of transformation.

These then are our two major themes: vertigo and transformation of identity. Roger Caillois (1961), in his important discussion of play, identified two types, those based on thrill and vertigo, a feature he termed ilinx, and those based on mimicry. Others have preferred Plato’s term, mimesis. The controlled creation of vertigo in a safe setting is a frequent element in play, as thrill seeking. Caillois (1961:23) speaks of it as an "attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" and of "surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness." In trance rituals the two are seen in combination and we find both vertigo and mimesis. Thus the experience of vertigo, a common theme in the world of play among children as well as adults is put to use in a sacred context. Here it serves the escape from the mundane and ordinary, to facilitate personal transformation. We shall return to this point again.

You will have noticed that possession trancers are likely to be women, although in African-American as well as West African religions, men, some men, will also go into trance. Still, the women are referred to as "wives" of the spirits, and the relationship between spirit and wife is emphasized in a variety of symbolic ways. In non-Possession trance, as among the !Kung, trancers are more likely to be men.

To summarize then, before turning to some other examples, we may say that spirit possession trance rituals may be seen as a complex multimedia art forms. Indeed, Gilbert Rouget (1985) compares them to opera, but that lacks the sacred dimension. In the African-American religions of Haiti and Brazil, they are only partially scripted, and so allow room for innovation and elaboration. In regard to the zar cult of Ethiopia, which shares a number of features with these Afro-American religions, Michel Leiris (1958) drew attention to the theatrical element in its possession trance rituals. This observation applies equally well to the examples I have been citing, where the theatrical involves much apparent spontaneity. This is not true of some of the religions in the other great centers of possession trance, namely in South East Asia, and most particularly in the great dramatic possession trance ritual performances of Bali. But we shall come
back to that shortly. In Haiti or Brazil, in the Zar cult of North East Africa, in the bori cult of the Hausa, in Malaysia and elsewhere, possession trance rituals demonstrate to the participants, in live action drama, who the spirits are, the ancestors, and others, what they say and do, how they act, what they want. Rather than as narratives in verbal form, the mythology that tells of the nature of the spirits, the past and the present, is offered and created in dramatic actions and interactions. Some of this is enacted in dance. Since the spirits are embodied, temporarily, in living members of the community, it can be said that the spirits live through community members and speak through them to their fellows. This brings up another important point. Possession trance always involves interactions among three parties: the spirit, its host, that is the human possession trance--the spirit's "horse,"--and a bystander or witness. Because the "horse" does not remember the events of possession, when his, or more likely her, own personality is in abeyance, the spirit must leave a message, if it wishes to communicate with the "horse." The phrase used is: "tell my horse." You may remember it as the title of Zora Neal Hurston's (1938[1981]) book on Haiti.

Let me now turn to some further examples of possession trance (slides 13). Here two Haitian women are said to be possessed by Guede spirits. The occasion is November 1st, All Saints' Day. The Guede are spirits of death, of harmful magic, but, paradoxically, also of fertility and sexuality. Yet they also have a third aspect, which comes into play here. And "play" is indeed the appropriate word. They are tricksters, who are identified with the poor, eating lowly foods, begging, and on All Saints' Day, begging from market women in a spirit of trick or treat. The clothing you see, the sunglasses, the bowler or top hats, the suit vests, etc., however, show them parodying the upper class, the elite, the powerful and wealthy. In the recent history of Haiti, there is an additional political point to be added. The dictator Papa Doc Duvalier, who came to power as a Black Power populist, an advocate of the masses of the poor, i.e., 80% or more of the population, affected an identification with the Guede and their chief, Baron Samedi. He wore sunglasses, dressed in black, and spoke in public in the nasal voice associated with these spirits. The tontons macoutes, Duvalier's so-called militia, too wore the sunglasses, emblematic of death and menace. The postures of these two women may suggest dance. But here (slide 14) the Guede are engaged in another activity. With their nostrils stuffed and their jaws tied like those of corpses, they roll about in the fire to which they are impervious. There is no music here. There is a crowd of by-standers, so we may call this a performance. It would stretch the term, however, were we to call these movements of the Guede "dance," or part of a dance performance.

Other spirits have different characteristics that can be
enacted dramatically and choreographically. Grann Ezili is a powerful old woman (slide 15). Because she is old, she dances with her back bent, in an almost crouching position. Here is a young girl, in trance, possessed by this spirit, moving and dancing in her characteristic fashion. The dance is called "do ba"—low back. Ritual dances in Haiti begin with a circling of the central pole, through which the spirits descend. The movement is usually, but not always, counterclockwise. But this circle soon breaks up. There is no special training for dancing. The steps are simple. On occasion, some secular dances of earlier periods have been integrated into the ritual, such as the French minuet. For the most part, they are non-partner dances. Possession trance dances are performances, in which there is an audience as well as a number of simultaneous participants.

Let me now briefly turn to a very different part of the world, famous for its possession trance rituals and performances. I turn to Bali. Here there is a great profusion of types of possession trance, from that of the seated spirit medium who acts as diviner and healer, to the presentations of classical dramas, in which performers are both in possession trance and masked, a combination that, in the context of world wide comparisons, is highly unusual. For the most part, spirits are said to reside in the mask, not in the masker. In Bali, there are kris dancers, both women and men (slide 16, 17, 18); there are male hobby horse trance dancers (slide 19, 20), and, most spectacularly, there are little girl trance dancers (slide 21). Possession trance of prepubescent children is highly unusual cross-culturally. Here they are put into trance through rotational motions of objects, so they will dance like puppets on a string. In Bali, these little girls embody the visiting goddess (slide 22, 23, 24, 25). They apparently are not taught the specific dances, which are quite acrobatic, including balancing on the shoulders of men (slide 26, 27). These girls, we are told by students of Bali, for example, most recently Suryani and Jensen (1993), grow up to be quite ordinary, without any special place in their society, nor any special psychological characteristics.

What is the relationship of dance to possession trance? Or, to ask the question in a way that might be more culturally sensitive: why do people dance in rituals for the spirits, in rituals in which the spirits participate, and in which the humans experience an altered state of consciousness? We are now in a better position to ask that question again and to consider my earlier suggestions. As I noted, we can identify three contexts: Spirits, in these societies, like people, enjoy music and dance. One way to invite them, is to put on the kind of occasion they are known to like. They are attracted by music and dance in their honor. Each spirit, or type of spirit, as in Haiti, has his or her own melodies, drum rhythms, song texts, dance steps, just as they have their preferred colors, food, drink, smokes, perfumes, etc. In outsiders' terms, we might ask in what way do the music. the
dance steps and the rest, are helpful in the induction of trance.

With regard to the role of music in trance induction, there have been some vigorous debates. Rouget, to whom I have referred several times, has strongly attacked the position according to which certain drum rhythms are, in some way, compelling, that rhythms of drums consistent with certain brain wave patterns, are to be seen as causative of trance states. Indeed, all kinds of music, some not rhythmical in any striking way, can be seen in these rituals. Moreover, the drummers themselves do not go into trance as a rule, nor do the majority of those present. In Haiti, only the specific spirits invited are expected to come in response to given drum rhythms. Others, if they come, may be regarded as ill-mannered party crashers. On the other hand, it is clear that there is a system of cues in place and the music and the dance steps contribute importantly to the suggestion and expectation that bring about these states. Moreover, specific movements of rotation in particular, as well as over breathing and exertion are also relevant here. In Haiti, the spirits, as manifested in persons in possession trance, try to induce possession trance in others, by twirling them. The local idea is that possession is, in some sense, contagious. Physiologically, the twirling is well designed to induce vertigo. A different example of dance steps as relevant to trance induction comes from Jamaica. Moore (1982:267) describes a pattern of dancing in Revival services the people call "trumping and laboring". "This," he says, "involves tramping heavily, bending from the waist, sucking in and releasing the breath while some of the group are still singing hymns. At this point, 'trumping and laboring' sounds become the percussion section and the musicians stop playing their instruments." "Trumping and laboring" appears to imitate movement and breathing patterns during trance, but by engaging in this behavior prior to the onset of the state, after a prolonged period of dancing, it helps to induce the possession trance state.

If dance leads to possession trance, it is also expressive of it. The spirits are invited by music and dance, and they take pleasure in dancing themselves. And each spirit, or kind of spirit, has his or her choreographic signature and personal identity. It is this identity that the possession trancer assumes. This personal transformation into someone or something else is a key element in the experience and in the religious and social significance of the ritual drama. This is not simply imitation of another, or conscious role playing, as by an impersonator, in a theatrical performance or by masking, but an intimate "becoming another." Finally, dancing and drum rhythms or other musical patterns may be the means of asking spirits to leave.

So far I have been speaking of the Afro-American and Balinese types of rituals in which possession trance is desired and the spirits are invited. Of course, this attitude toward spirit
possession is not unique to these societies that I have selected as my examples. There is, however, the contrasting situation in which possession by spirits is feared and in which odd behavior or dire circumstances may be interpreted as demonic possession. Here the spirits are likely to be induced to appear in order, perhaps, to question them, to discover their names, find out what they want and to transform them into helpers, by meeting their demands. This is a pattern found, for example in East Africa, in the zar cult of Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and Egypt. A third, more rigorous approach is familiar in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but not unique to it, in which spirits must be identified, their names discovered, and once these are known, to expel them. The zar examples generally involve dance. In cases of exorcism this is mostly not the case.

There is, however, a famous example of a linkage between dance and exorcism. It is found in the ancient south European tradition of tarantism. Tarantism, as illness and therapy, was studied in Apulia by Ernesto de Martino (1961) and his team in the 1950s. The practice is now said to be extinct. The illness, which struck mostly young women, presented itself as depression and appeared initially during the hot months of summer. It was attributed to the bite of a tarantula. De Martino suggests a relationship of the illness to the position of women in this patriarchal society. The therapeutic ritual, which had to be repeated annually, consisted of dancing and involved music and color symbolism as well. Here is an example (slides 28-39). At the beginning of the sequence we see the patient lying on the floor, in a resting position. There are musicians and family members. The dance sequence begins on the floor, with the woman sliding about in a circle and then beating the floor with her head. She then rises and circles the dance area, holding a colored scarf; she listens to the music and then moves about briskly until she collapses into the arms of family members. She then returns to the position of rest. These dances are repeated several times with intervals of rest between them. At the conclusion, we see her relaxed and cheerful. This outcome is called a miracle credited to St. Paul. Several days later, she performs an abbreviated version of this ritual in the church of St. Paul, in the nearby town of Galatina, where she gives thanks for her cure. The rotational movements we have spoken of earlier appear here again. In some cases they are more vigorous or aggressive. The idea of possession and exorcism is present here, although there is no impersonation, except to the extent that the tarantula’s behavior is thought to be enacted in the initial phase of the ritual.

Quite a different ritual of dance, trance and religious experience is found among the famous Mevlevi dervishes of Konya, in Turkey. The dance serves as a means of entering into a state of religious transcendence, exhibited in a highly choreographed performance. These so-called “whirling” dervishes have an
interesting history. Their brotherhood was founded in the 13th century in the name of the great Sufi poet and mystic Rumi. Their music and dance is unique in Islam. As the classical scholar E.R. Dodds (1951) has noted, Konya, their center, is one of the home communities of the Phrygian Dionysos. Nowadays, the Mevlevi's rituals can be seen not only in Konya, but also on their international tours. The ritual, called the Sema, begins with a eulogy to the Prophet Mohammed, and ends with a reading from the Qur'an. The dance, which is essentially controlled by the music, is repeated four times. While it looks the same each time, at least to the untutored eye, each section has its own mystical theme. The music, the dance steps, the costumes all have highly symbolic meanings (slides 40, 41, 42). The men dance with closed eyes. Beginning with arms crossed, they stretch them out, as their skirts fly. They circle about the dance space while rotating. They appear to have a fine sense of their space, keeping regular distances from each others. Their faces remain blank. While they are expected to experience a trance state, this subjective inner condition can, of course, not be seen in their highly controlled behavior. There is no evidence of loss of balance when the music alters and a phase of calm walking about follows.

We may now consider a final example. This time, we turn to the Hunza of Northern Pakistan. As M.H. Sidky (1994) has reported on the basis of recent ethnographic research, these Islamic people have maintained a local shamanic tradition. The religious practitioners act as healers and diviners. During a ritual, which Sidky was able to record, the bitan, or healer (slides 43, 44, 45, 46) began by inhaling the smoke of burning juniper branches. You note that this is the first time that we have encountered the use of substances to induce trance. This practice is only rarely found in connection with possession trance, although in some instances, as in Bali, smoke may be employed to terminate trance. Once smoked, the bitan begins his dance. He smiles and beckons the mountain spirits to descend. When they do, his dance movements are said to be controlled by the spirits. He comes close to the musicians to listen for the spirits' voices. After a sacrifice is performed, the bitan, now in trance, drinks the blood of the sacrifice, which is said to be taken through him by the spirits. He listens to their voices. The dance lasts for about thirty minutes. When the bitan hears the voices of the spirits, he conveys their message to the audience. He does so in a high pitched voice, while the musicians have stopped playing. These activities are repeated several times. The final phase consists of a rapid circling dance. In the end, the bitan collapses and is carried off by attendants.

This is quite a different ritual from the ones we have discussed so far. It is not the patient but the healer/diviner who goes into trance. The trance is a means of contacting the spirits, but does not involve impersonation. The trance is a
man. And although there is again dancing and circling, music and a heightened emotional state, followed by collapse, perhaps vertigo, we cannot speak of mimicry or mimesis, except to the extent that the message of the spirits is repeated, as the bitan perceives it, and the spirits act through him, controlling his movement and absorbing what he drinks. The experience and the meaning of the trance to the trancer appears to be quite different from that of the various types of possession trance we discussed earlier.

What, then, can we say to sum up the various examples we have considered in our discussion? Trance, dance and music do indeed occur together in ritual settings of many different types. They clearly carry an important emotional charge both for those who experience trance and to those who witness it. They have significance with regard to healing; they convey spirit messages to humans and thus influence human behavior. They bring the spirit world into direct contact with human beings. A number of physiological, and psychobiological means are utilized to produce these states that have played and continue to play such important roles in a great range of human societies. On the other hand, it is quite clear that there is no single type of trance state nor is a single type associated with dance and music. Nor, indeed is there a specific type of trance dance, nor are there any specific characteristics of trance music. The dance steps, the aesthetics of the dance, the music and its instrumentation, all use available resources, whether local or borrowed, ancient or occasionally novel. Trance, as a technique of the body, is open to a variety of constructions. Yet, as we have seen, two major themes return over and over again, regardless of the social, religious or cultural context: identification, impersonation, imitation, embodiment, in short mimesis on the one hand and vertigo inducing techniques that serve it on the other. Trance and dance make use of the basic endowment of humans, their psychological and biological capacities, to link them to each other and their supernatural world. These ancient traditions, which, in some ways, may clearly be said to go back to our earliest human ancestors, if not beyond, continue to be utilized in contemporary societies, where enthusiastic religions are at present expanding at home and abroad. Clearly this bodily expression and experience fulfills significant needs for many in times of rapid change and often crisis. We have been able to glimpse only a handful of traditional examples. Others may be found in New Age Cults, in the expanding African spirit religions, in religious renewal in many parts of the world, whether in the form of new religions or where old ones acquire new meanings and new practices. Rather than explore the aesthetic of trance dance, we have attempted to seek out, underlying its varying forms and diverse meanings, the psychological themes that make the experience possible. From this perspective, our study is only at its beginning.
References:


