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MYTHS, LEGENDS AND SHAMANISM
AND SOME ORIGINS OF FOLK-DANCE

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por LUCILE ARMSTRONG

The difficulties the folklorist encounters in field work, when investigating a particular subject, are well known to you. Would be helpers *invent* an answer to queries, if they do not know the answers, because they wish to please the questioner. Many of these explanations of «folklore» I was able to correct myself later, through study, but occasionally some misleading statements get into print, and because they *are* in print, are taken as facts. This is highly detrimental to genuine study. One of these misleading statements, to mention only one, is the fact that some people believe that «flamenco» dance and song are gypsy and was brought to Spain by the gypsies. Now a little thought will remind us that gypsies only came to Spain in the late 15th century, knowing *no* flamenco, while Southern Spanish dancers were well known in Rome, even before the time of Pliny means that the art of the Andalusian people must have been in existence at least 1 000 years earlier. A technique and tradition of a particular dance form as evolved as the flamenco cannot be worked out in a couple of hundred years. If it were possible, then all parts of Europe would have as equally complicated techniques as flamenco wherever there are gypsies. They have not, except in south-eastern Europe where these are of a very different style. This proves my point that the style of flamenco owes nothing to the gypsy heritage.

My special field of study is the Iberian folk dance. To understand it properly, it is necessary to know the background thoroughly, and to understand the mentality of the people who perform these dances.

After living in Spain and Portugal for 15 years I came back to London and taught folk dances to adults in an evening institute of the London County Council.

To *teach* folk dances properly you must know their meaning and that of movements and figures. Just teaching steps and figures by themselves gives no proper grounding. Otherwise there is nothing to prevent you from «just leaving out this bit» or to alter some part so as «to make the dance look more attractive to the spectators». These kinds of remarks are heard far too often — I could quote many instances of these misconceptions from several European countries.

People just do not realise that these same movements and figures meant something vital to their originators. Some were symbols of the psychology of primitive man; some necessities of expression of his beliefs, while some of them represented the drama of his world and his wish to placate or to invoke his deity and his earnest desire, that is, the desire to live fully.

To understand all this more thoroughly we have great teachers to turn to. The first is the late Prof. Carl Jung, who proved that what was buried in myth, legend, mystery and alchemy, is still alive in modern people, even if these myths and legends only manifest themselves through emotional symbols in their dream life. Jung discovered that what lies at the very depths of the unconscious bears a strong resemblance to the stages of the spiritual development of man, and what lies buried makes a complete break from the everyday world. Some of my pupils came to learn Iberian dances precisely because their psyche yearned for the release of those spiritual forces which lay buried deep in themselves, and they found echoes of these forces in the folk dances which helped them to «find themselves» and relieve the anxieties of modern minds. Many instances like the following could be quoted: «I am not coming to dancing class any more now, because I am not afraid any longer, and I am sure of myself». Folklore had helped the modern psyche.

Our second great teacher is Prof. Mircea Eliade, now in Chicago. His books teach us the fundamental unity upon which folklore, in its widest ramifications, has been based since neolithic times. I shall quote only one sentence relevant to my subject. On page 267 of his essay «Mephistophélès et l'Androgyne», we read, translated from the French, «Depth-psychology has

taught us that a symbol delivers its message and fulfills its function even when its significances escapes the conscious mind». His books are mines of information and give explanations on folklore and primitive beliefs and faiths; they teach us why we must not alter steps and figures and movements of folk dances as these were handed down to us by our ancestors.

Early man needed to renew himself and his world, to start again at the beginning. He did this with the help of his dances and songs. He did not suffer from our anxieties because he «washed his soul clean», so to speak, by his shamanistic rites and arts which are found the world over. Some of these shamanistic rites are still performed to-day.

The march of history cannot be reversed, but we can still learn how primitive man adjusted himself to his spiritual evolution and the renewal of his world. By studying his methods we can seek out another way, a modern way, of solving our psychological problems. This search is manifest in many ways in our times: in the interest in magic, in shamanistic rites, legends, myths, and the occult. Modern man is trying to come to terms with his anxieties and fears. Primitive man had worked out a solution in his own way, for he still could «walk with the gods» and had access to supernatural powers.

But besides Jung and Eliade, we have other teachers: Ropert Graves, the poet for instance, who elucidates so fully meanings hitherto obscure, concerning folk customs and beliefs. Others are Sir James Frazer, A. B. Cook, Jane Harrison E. O. James, E. Mosbacher, J. Maringer, Violet Alford and Gertrud Levy, to mention but a few. And from the point of view of song, we have especially Sir Maurice Bowra, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, with his contribution to the understanding of primitive song, man's use of verse and song as an integral part of his everyday life and to establish through these a connection with the supernatural.

Let us now turn to folk dance itself.

Folk dance — not *popular* dance.

Popular dance, like Mazurkas, say, was brought into being for society balls and permeated to all classes. This type becomes the fashion for short periods only. Whereas *folk* dances are either ritual

or social, but both were handed down by tradition. Some ritual dances became social when their ritual purpose was no longer believed in.

What is a folk dance?

It is an attempt by primitive man to influence supernatural forces through ritual movement, in order to win their favour and help to further human interest. In other words, it is sympathetic magic expressed through movement.

To give you some examples:

Some sword dancers step from side to side, all in a line, to show the Earth mother how wide the ore seam is to be in the mines. We now know that sword dancers were connected with mining districts. These dancers believed that given sufficient time *ore grew* and *matured* into precious metal in the womb of the Earth mother. Myths taught them this.

The second example is a shaman (or medicine man) who jumps over and around the sick person or animal. He wants to heal the sick by bringing the lost soul of the patient back to its body. But as he does not trust spirits to act of their own accord, he shows the lost soul through sympathetic magic what he wants it to do — which is, to re-enter the body so that soul and body become re-integrated once more and can live to the full as before.

The third example is taken from the Siberian shamans who leap astonishingly high, even when wearing their heavy ritual costumes, often weighing up to 30 kilos. These leaps into the air represent their ascension to heaven. They also perform amazingly complicated steps in their ritual dances to induce ecstasy.

The fourth and final example comes from classical antiquity. In the temples of Zeus Bromios, the lord of the dark and rain-laden sky, a heavy fleece, cut into a pointed oval to represent the vagina of the Earth mother, was kept and brought out with singing and dancing during droughts to induce the god to mate with the Earth mother and to fertilise her with the seed of his rain. The same happens in Arnhen Land in Australia even now, only that here the persons involved are a couple of divine ancestors.

I have used the word extasy in connection with shamans. It is hard to explain this word in modern parlance. One has to use the terms of psychology or magic. According to this psychology, the shaman has to make a connection between the spirits on whose help he relies and his patient. This can only be done by emotion of high intensity. The shaman forms the bridge between spirits and patient. Modern man also knows extasy, in religious fervour, or in love, or in aesthetic admiration; but the difference between a shaman and modern man lies in the fact that a shaman *directs* the mana which radiates from him through emotion, whereas modern man *drifts* on his emotional wave. Thus the shaman controls the whole process of emotion, extasy and mana, whereas modern man does not remain master of these psychic forces but is mastered by them.

As Prof. Eliade pointed out: Shamanism is a technique of extasy. And this extasy has created many a dance figure and step.

And now: *How about myths?* How did they originate?

They are the theology of early man, evolved from the experiences of shamans in their extatic journeys to heaven and hell. During their extasies, the shamans described the spirits they saw and the landscapes they went through while on these journeys.

Where do legends stand?

Legends are a deterioration of myth and they could be called the hagiology of early man attached to individual heroes, war heroes or culture heroes. From the few examples we have just mentioned, we see that folk dance originated from the beliefs and faiths of primitive man. Folk dances are composed of steps and figures which had a practical intention.

Let us glance at some of these figures:

The *Circle* first, represented either the moon disc, later the sun disc or sun wheel, or the wheel of life, or in some cases the protective circle used as a defence against evil spirits.

The *Snake* figure — another basic symbol — so very frequent in European dances is a water symbol and therefore a fertility symbol — essential to pastoral and agricultural communities.

The figure of 8 is another, it is the sacred symbol of eternity, renewal and completeness.

It is also performed in a double eight, that is, the figure contains more than two loops. This also appears in Egyptian, Classical and Near Eastern paintings, in sculpture, carvings and mosaics. There are many such figures in Christian Churches.

The *V-shape*, widespread and frequent in European dances represents cow's horns or bull's horns as in Cretan Knossos.

The *diamond or Lozenge* shows us the symbol of «regressus ad uterum» and therefore of re-birth. This symbol is extremely important to primitive man as the reddened bones and sepulchres show us.

One could go on giving many examples, but let us see how the same scheme of a meaningful world is expressed in the costumes of shamans by using symbolic colours:

Blue for sky or water i.e. power or latent life.

White for the full moon i.e. maturity and dignity.

Black for the new moon or death i.e. rebirth.

Yellow for the powers of the underworld.

Green for self-renewing life.

Ochre or red for inherent life.

Shamans wear these colours to attract their guardian spirits and call on them for aid in those particular regions which their colour denotes.

One could go on giving examples, but they all serve to emphasise the importance of each step as it is found in the original context and the ancient links between shamanism and folk dances.

I hope that from those few examples given, you will agree that shamanism, myth and faiths, all played an important part in the origin of folk dance and therefore you will support my plea not to alter folk dances, its figures, steps and movements because these are vital to its *spirit*.

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It is impossible to quote the innumerable books and articles which have a bearing on the subject in the fields of Archaeology, Psychology, Ethnography, Ethnology and Folklore. I can only refer to the bibliographies in the books listed above.

