

# DANCING IN THE STREETS

A HISTORY OF COLLECTIVE JOY

BARBARA EHRENREICH



DANCING  
IN THE  
STREETS

A HISTORY OF COLLECTIVE JOY



BARBARA EHRENREICH

A HOLT PAPERBACK

Metropolitan Books / Henry Holt and Company

New York

*To Anna and Clara—you know how to do it.*

---

---

# Table of Contents

Title Page

Introduction: - Invitation to the Dance

1 - The Archaic Roots of Ecstasy

*The God of Ecstasy*

2 - Civilization and Backlash

*Repression in Rome*

3 - Jesus and Dionysus

*Dionysus and the Jews*

*Ecstatic Christianity*

4 - From the Churches to the Streets: The Creation of Carnival

*The War on Dance*

*Carnival Comes Together*

*The Sacred Versus the Profane*

5 - Killing Carnival: Reformation and Repression

*Dangerous Dances*

*Protestants and Guns*

*The Withdrawal of the Upper Class*

6 - A Note on Puritanism and Military Reform

*Clockwork Armies*

*Drilling with Dromedaries*

7 - An Epidemic of Melancholy

*The Anxious Self*

*The Tormented Soul*

*The Lost Cure*

8 - Guns Against Drums: Imperialism Encounters Ecstasy

*Black Carnival*

*The Preservation of Ecstasy*

*Ecstatic Revolution*

9 - Fascist Spectacles

*The Festivals of the French Revolution*

*The Military as Entertainment*

*Governance by Spectacle*

10 - The Rock Rebellion

*The Revolt of the Audience*

*Rock and the African Ecstatic Tradition*

*Opposition, Triumph, and Decline*

11 - Carnivalizing Sports

*A Brief History of Western Sports*

*The Carnivalization of Sports*

*The Revolt of the Fans*

Conclusion: - The Possibility of Revival

ALSO BY BARBARA EHRENREICH

**Praise for *Dancing in the Streets***

**NOTES**

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**INDEX**

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Notes

Copyright Page

---

# Introduction:

## Invitation to the Dance

When Europeans undertook their campaigns of conquest and exploration in what seemed to the “new” worlds, they found the natives engaged in many strange and lurid activities. Cannibalism was reported, though seldom convincingly documented, along with human sacrifice, bodily mutilation, body and face painting, and flagrantly open sexual practices. Equally jarring to European sensibilities was the almost ubiquitous practice of ecstatic ritual, in which the natives would gather to dance, sing, or chant to a state of exhaustion and, beyond that, sometimes trance. Everywhere they went—among the hunter-gatherers of Australia, the horticulturists of Polynesia, the village peoples of India—white men and occasionally women witnessed these electrifying rites so frequently that there seemed to them to be, among “the present societies of savage men ... an extraordinary uniformity, in spite of much local variation, in ritual and mythology.”<sup>1</sup> The European idea of the “savage” came to focus on the image of painted and bizarrely costumed bodies, drumming and dancing with wild abandon by the light of a fire.

What did they actually see? A single ritual could look very different to different observers. When he arrived in Tahiti in the late 1700s, Captain Cook watched groups of girls performing “a very indecent dance which they call Timorodee, singing the most indecent songs and using most indecent actions ... In doing this they keep time to a great nicety.”<sup>2</sup> About sixty years later, Herman Melville found the same ritual, by then called “Lory-Lory” and perhaps modified in other ways, full of sensual charm.

Presently, raising a strange chant, they softly sway themselves, gradually quickening the movement, until at length, for a few passionate moments with throbbing bosoms, and glowing cheeks, they abandon themselves to all the spirit of the dance, apparently lost to everything around. But soon subsiding again into the same languid measure as before, the eyes swimming in their heads, join in one wild chorus, and sink into each other’s arms.<sup>3</sup>

Like Captain Cook, Charles Darwin was repelled by the corroboree rite of western Australian natives, reporting that

the dancing consisted in their running either sideways or in Indian file into an open space, and stamping the ground with great force as they marched together. Their heavy footsteps were accompanied with a kind of grunt, by beating their clubs and spears together, and by various other gesticulations, such as extending their arms and wriggling their bodies. It was a most rude, barbarous scene, and, to our ideas, without

But to the anthropologists Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, a similar Aboriginal rite was far more compelling, perhaps even enticing: “The smoke, the blazing torches, the showers of sparks falling all directions and the masses of dancing, yelling men formed a genuinely wild and savage scene which it is impossible to convey any adequate idea in words.”<sup>5</sup> It was this description that fed into the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s notion of *collective effervescence*: the ritually induced passion or ecstasy that cements social bonds and, he proposed, forms the ultimate basis of religion.

Through the institution of slavery, European Americans had the opportunity to observe their own captive “natives” at close range, and they too reported varying and contradictory responses to the ecstatic rituals of the transplanted Africans. Many whites of the slave-owning class saw such practices as “noisy, crude, impious, and, simply, dissolute,”<sup>6</sup> and took strong measures to suppress them. The nineteenth-century absentee owner of a Jamaican plantation found his slaves doing a *myal* dance probably derived from an initiation rite of the Azande people of Africa, and described them as engaged in “a great variety of grotesque actions, and chanting all the while something between a song and a howl.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, an English visitor to Trinidad in 1845 reported disgustedly that

on Christmas Eve, it seemed as if, under the guise of religion, all Pandemonium had been let loose ... Drunkenness bursting forth in yells and bacchanalian orgies, was universal amongst the blacks ... Sleep was out of the question, in the midst of such a disgusting and fiendish saturnalia ... The musicians were attended by a multitude of drunken people of both sexes, the women being of the lowest class; and all dancing, screaming and clapping their hands, like so many demons. All this was the effect of the “midnight mass,” ending, as all such masses do, in every species of depravity.<sup>8</sup>

Other white observers, though, were sometimes surprised to find themselves drawn in by the peculiar power of such African-derived rituals and festivities. Traveling in the mid-nineteenth century, Frederick Law Olmsted observed a black Christian service in New Orleans and was swept up by the “shouts, and groans, terrific shrieks, and indescribable expressions of ecstasy—of pleasure and agony,” to the point where he found his own face “glowing” and feet stamping, as if he had been “infected unconsciously.”<sup>9</sup> Clinton Furness, a traveler to South Carolina in the 1920s, reported a similar experience while watching an African American *ring-shout*, or danced form of religious worship.

Several men moved their feet alternately, in strange syncopation. A rhythm was born, almost without reference to the words of the preacher. It seemed to take place almost visibly, and grow. I was gripped with the feeling of a mass-intelligence, a self-conscious entity, gradually informing the crowd and taking possession of every mind there, including my own ... I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us

On the whole, though, white observers regarded the ecstatic rituals of darker-skinned peoples with horror and revulsion. *Grotesque* is one word that appears again and again in European accounts of such events; *hideous* is another. Henri Junod, a nineteenth-century Swiss missionary among the Bonga people of southern Mozambique, complained of the drums' "frightful din" and "infernal racket."<sup>11</sup> Other Catholic missionaries, upon hearing the African drumbeat announcing a ritual event, felt it was their duty to disrupt "the hellish practice."<sup>12</sup> Well into the twentieth century, the sound of drumming was enough to spook the white traveler, suggestive as it was of a world beyond human ken. "I have never heard an eerier sound," a young English visitor to South Africa reports in the 1910 novel *Prester John*. "Neither human nor animal it seemed, but the voice of that world between which is hidden from man's sight and hearing."<sup>13</sup> In the introduction to his 1926 book on tribal dancing, the writer V. D. Hambly pleaded with his readers for a little "sympathy" for his subject.

The student of primitive music and dancing will have to cultivate a habit of broad-minded consideration for the actions of backward races ... Music and dancing performed wildly by firelight in a tropical forest have not seldom provoked the censure and disgust of European visitors, who have seen only what is grotesque or sensual.<sup>14</sup>

Or, in many cases, may have elected not to see at all: When the intrepid entomologist Evelyn Cheeseman tramped through New Guinea in search of new insect species in the early 1930s, she showed not the slightest curiosity about the many native "dancing grounds" she passed through. At one village she and her bearers were asked to leave because there was to be a feast and dance that evening, which were *tambu*, or forbidden, for outsiders to witness. Cheeseman was miffed by the glitch in her plans but comforted herself with the thought that "it is of course well known that it is not particularly desirable to stop in a strange village when the natives are being worked up to their usual frenzy of devil worship."<sup>15</sup>

Particularly disturbing to white observers was the occasional climax of ecstatic ritual, in which some or all of the participants would, after prolonged dancing and singing or chanting, enter what we might now call an "altered state of consciousness," or trance. People caught up in trance might speak in a strange voice or language, display a marked indifference to pain, contort their bodies in ways seemingly impossible in normal life, foam at the mouth, see visions, believe themselves to be possessed by a spirit or deity, and ultimately collapse.<sup>a</sup>

A missionary among the Fiji Islanders described such a trance state as "a horrible sight,"<sup>16</sup> but that was a sight that was not always possible for the traveler to avoid. In her 1963 survey of the ethnographic literature, the anthropologist Erika Bourguignon found that 92 percent of small-scale societies surveyed encouraged some sort of religious trances, in most cases through ecstatic group ritual.<sup>17</sup> In one of the many accounts of trance behavior among "primitive" peoples, the early-twentieth-century German scholar T. K. Oesterreich offers this, from a white visitor to Polynesia.



—As soon as the god was supposed to have entered the priest, the latter became violently agitated, and worked himself up to the highest pitch of apparent frenzy, the muscles of the limbs seemed convulsed, the body swelled, the countenance became terrific, the features distorted, the eyes wild and strained. In this state he often rolled on the earth, foaming at the mouth.<sup>18</sup>

Promiscuous sex was at least comprehensible to the European mind; even human sacrifice and cannibalism have echoes in Christian rite. But as the anthropologist Michael Taussig writes, “It’s the ability to become *possessed* ... that signifies to Europeans awesome Otherness if not downright savagery.”<sup>19</sup> Trance was what many of those wild rituals seemed to lead up to, and for Europeans, represented the very heart of darkness—a place beyond the human self.

Or, what was worse—a place *within* the human self. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad’s narrator observes an African ritual and reflects that

it was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of their being a meaning in it which you—so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything.<sup>20</sup>

To Europeans, there was an obvious explanation for the ecstatic practices of native peoples around the world. Since these strange behaviors could be found in “primitive” cultures almost everywhere and since they were never indulged in by the “civilized,” it followed that they must result from some fundamental defect of the “savage mind.” It was less stable than the civilized mind, more childlike, “plastic,” and vulnerable to irrational influence or “autosuggestion.”<sup>21</sup> In some instances, the savage mind was described as “out of control” and lacking the discipline and restraint that Europeans of the seventeenth century and beyond came to see as their own defining characteristics. In other accounts the savage was perhaps too much *under* control—of his or her “witch doctor,” that is—or as a victim of “mob psychology.”<sup>22</sup> The American political scientist Frederick Morgan Davenport even proposed an anatomical explanation for the bizarre behavior of primitives: They had only a “single spinal ganglion” to process incoming sensory signals and convert them into muscular responses, while the civilized mind had, of course, an entire brain with which to assess the incoming data and weigh the body’s responses.<sup>23</sup> Hence the susceptibility of the savage to the compelling music and visual images of his or her culture’s religious rituals—which was regrettable, since “the last thing the superstitious and impulsive negro race needs is a stirring of the emotions.”<sup>24</sup>

But if they thought about it, many Europeans must have realized that the group ecstasy so common

among “natives” had certain parallels within Europe itself. For example, Catholic missionaries setting out from France after the 1730s would have heard about the heretical Parisian “convulsionary” cult whose customary style of worship featured scenes as wild as anything that could be found among the “savages.”

While the assembled company redoubled their prayers and collectively reached extreme heights of religious enthusiasm, at least one of their number would suddenly lapse into uncontrolled motor activity ... They thrashed about on the floor in a state of frenzy, screaming, roaring, trembling, and twitching ... The excitement and the disordered movements, which might last for several hours, usually proved highly contagious, with certain convulsionaries apparently serving as a catalyst for the onset of various bodily agitations in others.<sup>25</sup>

Later catalogers of “primitive” ecstatic behavior, like T. K. Oesterreich, recognized a more mundane European analogue to the bewildering rites of “savages” in the familiar tradition of carnival, where otherwise sober people costumed themselves, drank to excess, danced through the night, and otherwise inverted the normal staid and Christian order. “It must ... be admitted,” he wrote, “that civilized people show a high degree of autosuggestibility in certain circumstances. By way of example we may quote the peculiar psychic intoxication to which in certain places (e.g., Munich and Cologne) a large part of the population falls victim on a given day of the year (Carnival).”<sup>26</sup> Critics of the traditional European festivities sometimes drove home their point by imagining the colonial encounter in reverse, with a “savage” registering shock at the behavior of European carnival-goers. In 1805, for example, a founder of the Basle Bible Society published a brochure entitled *Conversation of a Converted Hottentot with a European Christian During Carnival Time*, in which the “Hottentot” concludes that Basle is partially inhabited by “barbarous non-converted heathens.” At the end of the nineteenth century, a similar pamphlet featured a visiting “converted Hindu,” who confides that the wild doings at Basle’s *Fastnacht* festivities put him in mind of “the idolatrous feasts and dances of my fellow-countrymen who are still heathens.”<sup>27</sup>

It was among their social inferiors, however, that Europeans found a more immediate analogue to the foreign “savage.” By the eighteenth century, the anthropologist Ann Stoler writes, “strong parallels were made between the immoral lives of the British underclass, Irish peasants, and ‘primitive’ Africans.”<sup>28</sup> The English saw parallels between their own lower classes and Native Americans: “Savage slaves be in great Britaine here, as any you can show me there.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, a mid-nineteenth-century visitor to rural Burgundy, in France, offered the caustic observation that “you don’t have to go to America to see savages.”<sup>30</sup> And who were those people whose revels disrupted whole cities during carnivals in Germany, France, England, and Spain? By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were likely to be peasants and the urban poor, with respectable folk doing their best to stay indoors during these dangerously licentious times.

So when the phenomenon of collective ecstasy entered the colonialist European mind, it was stained with feelings of hostility, contempt, and fear. Group ecstasy was something “others” experienced—savages or lower-class Europeans. In fact, the capacity for abandonment, for self-loss in the rhythm and emotions of the group, was a defining feature of “savagery” or otherness generally, signaling some fatal weakness of mind. As horrified witnesses of ecstatic ritual, Europeans may have learned

very little about the peoples they visited (and often destroyed in the process)—their deities and traditions, their cultures and worldview. But they did learn, or imaginatively construct, something centrally important about themselves: that the essence of the Western mind, and particularly the Western male, upper-class mind, was its ability to resist the contagious rhythm of the drums, to wall itself up in a fortress of ego and rationality against the seductive wildness of the world.

## *Science Confronts the Ecstatic*

With the rise of the social sciences, and especially the anthropology of the 1930s and thereafter, Westerners began to view the ecstatic practices of non-Westerners in an ostensibly more open-minded way. Words like *savage* and *primitive* dropped from the ethnographic vocabulary, along with the notion that the people who had once borne these labels represented a biologically less evolved form of *Homo sapiens*. Medical science could find no differences in the brains of the former primitives to account for their different behavior; colonialists necessarily observed that yesterday's "savage" might be today's shopkeeper, soldier, or servant. As humanity began to look more like a family of potential equals, Westerners had to concede that the ecstatic behavior found in traditional cultures was not the hallmark of savage "otherness" but the expression of a capacity that may exist, for better or for worse, in all of us.

By the 1930s, anthropologists had begun to think of the rituals of small-scale societies as *functional*, meaning in some sense rational. Humans are social animals, and rituals, ecstatic or otherwise, could be an expression of this sociality, a way of renewing the bonds that held a community together. In the functionalist anthropology that reached full bloom in the 1940s and '50s, many of the formerly bizarre-seeming activities of native peoples were explained in this way: as mechanisms for achieving cohesiveness and generating feelings of unity. Americans tried to achieve the same thing through patriotic and religious rituals; the "natives" simply had a different approach.

But right up to our own time, even the most scientific and sympathetic observers have tended to view the *ecstatic* rituals of non-Western cultures with deep misgivings, when they choose to view them at all. A certain distaste for the proceedings infects the anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano's 1973 description of ecstatic rites conducted by the Hamadsha brotherhoods of Morocco. "The drumming, by this time, was beginning to have a dulling effect on me," he reported, "and the music of the ghita an irritating one ... The smell of all the hot, close, sweating bodies was stifling."<sup>31</sup>

Or consider a curious silence in the anthropologist Victor Turner's famous study of "the ritual process." Perhaps more than any other anthropologist of the mid-twentieth century, he recognized collective ecstasy as a universal capacity and saw it as an expression of what he called *communitas*, meaning, roughly, the spontaneous love and solidarity that can arise within a community of equals. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner admitted to an initial "prejudice against ritual" and tendency to discount "the thudding of ritual drums."<sup>32</sup> Setting out to correct this oversight, he launched a detailed study of the Isoma cult ritual of the Ndembu people, which he introduces to the reader as consisting of three parts. The first two parts, which involve the manipulation of symbolic objects, are described in great detail and subjected to a thorough structuralist analysis. But the third and final phase, the Kumbuka, or "festive dance," which one might imagine was the climax of the entire business, is never mentioned again. Apparently Turner decided to skip that part.<sup>b</sup>

Turner's theories have been widely credited with giving ecstatic—as well as merely spontaneous and unruly—group behavior a legitimate place in anthropology. In fact, it was a marginal and second-rate place he offered it. To Turner, the central thing about a culture was its *structure*, meaning

essentially, its hierarchies and rules. The function of ecstatic ritual, he proposed, was to keep the structure from becoming overly rigid and unstable by providing occasional relief in the form of collective excitement and festivity. But only very *occasional* relief. The thrills of *communitas* had to be “liminal,” or marginal, in Turner’s scheme; otherwise social breakdown might ensue, “speed followed by despotism.”<sup>33</sup> Hence his irritation with the hippies of his own mid-1960s American culture, who, in his description, employed “‘mind-expanding’ drugs, ‘rock’ music, and flashing lights ... to establish a ‘total’ communion with one another,” and who imagined that “the ecstasy of spontaneous *communitas*” could be prolonged into a routine condition.<sup>34</sup> This “Edenic fantasy” seemed utterly irresponsible to Turner, who—apparently not noticing that many of these hippies were involved in subsistence agriculture and other productive ventures—reminded his reader that we do not have to worry about “the supplying of humble needs, such as food, drink, clothing.” Echoing the conventional Western cultural bias toward individualism, he added that it’s a good idea to keep a certain “mystery of mutual distance” between individuals.<sup>35</sup>

Other anthropologists turned to psychology to explain the extravagant rituals of non-Western peoples. Where European and American travelers had once seen savagery, they now saw mental illness, perhaps even nutritional in origin; Crapanzano wondered whether the Hamadsha ecstatics might be suffering from a calcium deficiency.<sup>36</sup> The most frequent diagnosis was *hysteria*, a term invented to describe the neurotic symptoms of upper-middle-class Viennese women near the turn of the century, but now blithely applied to Haitian villagers, Sri Lankan peasants, and anyone else whose behavior defied rational analysis. Alfred Métraux, the renowned ethnographer of the ecstatic Haitian tradition of Vodou, or voodoo, thought that “the symptoms of the opening phase of trance are clearly psychopathological. They conform exactly, in their main features, to the stock clinical description of hysteria.”<sup>37</sup> And in a 1981 book on female ecstatics in Sri Lanka, another anthropologist judged that “many of these women are, in a purely clinical sense, hysterical.”<sup>38</sup>

In very basic ways, psychology was ill-prepared to shoulder the burden anthropologists tried to throw its way. The new science aimed at a universal theory of human emotion and personality, but its theories were derived entirely from studies of the various compulsions, phobias, tics, and “neuraesthenias” afflicting affluent, urban Westerners—disorders that seemed to have no counterparts among “primitives” in their native lands.<sup>39</sup> Not only was the science of psychology narrowly culturally bound; its emphasis on pathology largely precluded any careful study of the more pleasurable emotions, including the kind of joy—growing into ecstasy—that was the hallmark of so many “native” rituals and celebrations. In the psychological language of *needs* and *drives*, people do not freely and affirmatively search for pleasure; rather, they are “driven” by cravings that resemble pain. To this day, and no doubt for good reasons, suffering remains the almost exclusive preoccupation of professional psychology. Journals in the field have published forty-five thousand articles in the last thirty years on depression, but only four hundred on joy.<sup>40</sup>

There was one form of pleasure that deeply interested psychologists, from Sigmund Freud on, and that was sexual pleasure. If the festivities and ecstatic rituals of “primitives” had routinely culminated in sexual acts, either public or private, psychology might have been more comfortable with them. The music, the excitement, the close-packed bodies could then all be understood as aphrodisiacs, allowing people to throw off their normal restraints. This is in fact how many Westerners chose to interpret the rituals they observed anyway—as indecent, wanton, and surely sexual in aim.

Some ecstatic rituals did indeed include sexual acts—most commonly pantomimed—or at least ended with couples drifting off together in the night. The Australian corroboree, for example, sometimes featured sexual intercourse of a deliberately “incestuous” kind; that is, involving men and women of the same tribal subunit, which is normally taboo. But even in that case, sex was only part

the proceedings, and by no means the grand climax, so to speak. More commonly, ecstatic rituals were rather chaste undertakings, involving women and men of all ages, following careful scripts, and serving a function that is perhaps best described as “religious.” The self-loss that participants sought in ecstatic ritual was not through physical merger with another person but through a kind of spiritual merger with the group.

Sexual ecstasy usually arises among dyads, or groups of two, but the ritual ecstasy of “primitive” groups emerged within groups generally composed of thirty or more participants. Thanks to psychology and the psychological concerns of Western culture generally, we have a rich language for describing the emotions drawing one person to another—from the most fleeting sexual attraction, to ego-dissolving love, all the way to the destructive force of obsession. What we lack is any way of describing and understanding the “love” that may exist among dozens of people at a time; and it is this kind of love that is expressed in ecstatic ritual. Durkheim’s notion of *collective effervescence* and Turner’s idea of *communitas* each reach, in their own ways, toward some conception of love that serves to knit people together in groups larger than two. But if homosexual attraction is the love “that dares not speak its name,” the love that binds people to the collective has no name at all to speak. *Communitas* and *collective effervescence* describe aspects or moments of communal excitement; there is no word for the love—or force or need—that leads individuals to seek ecstatic merger with the group.

Freud, the patriarch of Western psychology, was unprepared or unwilling to shed any light on this subject. It is doubtful that he ever witnessed, much less experienced, anything in the way of collective ecstasy. He was aware of the European tradition of carnival, for example, but saw it through the usual prejudices of his class. In a letter to his fiancée, Martha Bernays, he agreed with her that the behavior of the lower-class revelers at the town fair in Wandsbeck was “neither pleasant nor edifying, especially when compared to the more acceptable and bourgeois pleasures of “an hour’s chat nestled close to one’s love” or “the reading of a book.”<sup>41</sup> In his theoretical work too, he could see nothing very edifying about the emotions linking people in groups or, as he put it, crowds. As the anthropologist Charles Lindholm writes, Freud was much taken with the “expansive and intoxicating self-loss” accompanying the love between two individuals, while “in his discourse on the group the emphasis remains on guilt, anxiety and repressed aggression.”<sup>42</sup> What people found in the crowd, Freud opined, was a chance to submit to a leader playing the Oedipal role of “primal father”—“witch doctor,” presumably, or demagogue.

In Freud’s scheme of human affinities, there was only one kind of love: the dyadic, erotic love of one individual for another. This is the problem he set forth in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: “The antithesis between civilization and sexuality [derives] from the circumstance that sexual love is a relationship between individuals in which a third can only be superfluous or disturbing, whereas civilization is founded on relations between a considerable number of individuals.”<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately for civilization, Freud could not imagine a kind of love binding such larger groups of persons. Eros, he said, could unite people two by two, but “he is not willing to go further.” Hence the excitement of groups could only be derivative of the individuals’ dyadic love for the group leader; never mind the ecstatic groups, of the kind observed in “primitive” ritual, often had no leader or central figure at all.

But Western psychology was disabled from comprehending the phenomenon of collective ecstasy in a more philosophically profound way as well. Psychology, almost by definition, focuses on the individual self; its therapies are aimed at bolstering that self against the force of irrational and repressed emotion. But the *self* is itself a parochial concept, far more meaningful in early-twentieth-century Cambridge or Vienna than in the distant outposts of nineteenth-century European colonialism. As Luh Ketut Suryani and Gordon Jensen, ethnographers of Balinese ecstatic ritual, observe: “The sense of being in control of one’s self is prominent and highly valued in Western personality and

thought. This trait is not characteristic of the Balinese, whose lives have in the main been controlled by their families, their ancestors, and the supernatural.”<sup>44</sup>

To the “self”-admiring Western mind, any form of self-loss—other than the kind associated with romantic love—could only be pathological. And that is how modern psychology has tended to categorize it. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (fourth edition), or *DSM-IV*, the standard psychiatric guide to mental disorders, lists something called *depersonalization disorder*, which involves a feeling of being “detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body.”<sup>45</sup> As Lindholm comments, the psychological model for understanding collective ecstasy “is strongly value loaded. It assumes that the desire for self-loss *must* be a result of antisocial and regressive id drives.”<sup>46</sup> Those dancing, exulting practitioners of ecstatic ritual may have thought they were communing with the deities, building community solidarity, or even performing acts of healing. But in the eyes of Western psychology, they were only manifesting the symptoms of the illness.

One might expect that sociology, which ordinarily deals with groups larger than two, would have some insights to offer into the phenomenon of collective ecstasy. But where psychology found one illness and irrationality, sociology has tended, in recent decades anyway, to go too far in the other direction, interpreting group behavior as an entirely rational and self-interested undertaking on the part of each participant. The scores of sociological articles on crowd behavior published since the 1960s display an almost exclusive focus on such relatively dry matters as “the structure of the group ... its pattern of recruitment, its ideology and its contradictions, the mechanisms used to gain commitment, and the maintenance and evolution of the group within a given social context.”<sup>47</sup> As a result, according to Lindholm, we get no sense of “the excitement of participation in an ecstatic group.” Another dissenter from the conventional view, the sociologist John Lofland, demanded of his fellow scholars in the early 1980s: “Who now seriously speaks of ‘ecstatic crowds,’ ‘social epidemics,’ ‘fevers,’ ‘religious hysterias,’ ‘passionate enthusiasms,’ ‘frantic and disheveled dances’?”<sup>48</sup>

## *Techniques of Ecstasy*

That is my mission in this book: to speak seriously of the largely ignored and perhaps incommunicable thrill of the group deliberately united in joy and exaltation. Not every form of “irrational” group behavior will be considered here; panics, crazes, fads, and spontaneous “mob” activities do not fall within our purview. Lynchings—or, for that matter, riots—may generate intense excitement and pleasure in their participants, but the focus here is on the kinds of events witnessed by Europeans in “primitive” societies and recalled in the European carnival tradition. These were not spontaneous outbreaks of “hysteria,” as some Europeans tended to imagine; nor were they occasions for the suspension of all inhibitions and a general “letting go.” The behavior that seemed so “savage and wild to Western observers was in fact deliberately planned, organized, and at all times subject to cultural rules and expectations.

When later Westerners studied indigenous rituals in a relatively nonjudgmental way, they learned that such rituals and festivities were far from spontaneous in their timing, for example. The occasion might be a seasonal change, a calendrical event, the initiation of young people, a wedding, funeral, coronation—in other words, something that could be anticipated for weeks or months and carefully prepared for. Appropriate foods had to be gathered and prepared in advance; costumes and masks designed; songs and dances rehearsed. These were group efforts, the result of careful and sober

planning.

Furthermore, even at the height of the supposed frenzy, cultural expectations guided behavior, determining the special roles of the sexes and age groups, and going so far as to regulate the “wildest” of experiences—trance. In some festive settings—meaning those that can be construed relatively secular or recreational—trance does not occur and is not expected to. In others, such as certain West African-derived religious rites or !Kung healing rituals, the achievement of trance is welcomed as a mark of spiritual status and is sought with great discipline and concentration. Each ecstatic ritual, as the ethnographers who followed the colonialists learned, was specific to its own culture, endowed with different meanings to its participants, and shaped by human creativity and intellect.

Yet for all the local variations, there are certain commonalities, or at least common ingredients, that can be found in ecstatic rituals and festivities worldwide and throughout the ages. As Turner observed, “Each kind of ritual, ceremony, or festival comes to be coupled with special types of attire, music, dance, food and drink ... and, often, masks, body-painting, headgear, furniture and shrines.”<sup>49</sup> The ingredients of ecstatic rituals and festivities—music, dancing, eating, drinking or indulging in other mind-altering drugs, costuming and/or various forms of self-decoration, such as face and body painting—seem to be universal.<sup>50</sup> Other common, but not universal, ingredients, especially of long and more elaborate events, include processions, religious rituals involving the manipulation of sacred objects, athletic and other contests, dramatic performances, and comedy, generally of a mocking or satirical nature.<sup>50</sup> But the core elements are, again and again, the dancing, the feasting, the artistic decoration of faces and bodies.

Darwin could find no “meaning” in the Aboriginal rites he witnessed, and meaning is indeed a hard thing for cultural outsiders to ascribe. People have employed the same constellation of activities—dancing, feasting, costuming, et cetera—in pursuit of very different ends. Some of these rites are recognizably religious, in the sense that they aim to evoke the presence of a deity or deities. Others, like the !Kung rituals, are understood by their participants to serve an almost medical function, whether or not a deity is enlisted. Still others seem to be “merely” recreational, if we are safe assuming that the distinctions between religion, healing, and recreation carry over from Western culture to others. Anthropologists have tended to believe that they do, and draw a line between *ritual* and *festivity*, with the former being seen as having religious or healing functions, whereas “festivity designates occasions considered to be pagan, recreational, or for children.”<sup>51</sup> But it is not clear that this distinction between ritual and festivity, religion and recreation, is always meaningful to the participants. A Georgia slave recalled that other slaves used to say of their church services or “meetings”—and please forgive the patronizing rendition of dialect in my source here—“I like meetin’ jus’ as good as I like a party.”<sup>52</sup>

In this book, I will observe the anthropological distinction between rituals and festivities as much as possible, but the emphasis will be on the phenomenon itself—the group activities of dancing, feasting, and so on—and the feelings they seem to inspire. Whatever the stated meaning of the rituals—to contact the deities, celebrate a wedding, or gear up for war—this same constellation of activities has been used again and again to achieve communal pleasure, even ecstasy or bliss. Why these activities and not others? We will return to this question in the next chapter, but for now, the simplest answer is that these are the activities that *work*. That through millennia of experimentation, humankind discovered what the historian Mircea Eliade, in his analysis of shamanistic rites, termed *techniques of ecstasy*.

The question that motivates this book originates in a sense of loss: If ecstatic rituals and festivities were once so widespread, why is so little left of them today? If the “techniques” of ecstasy repre-

an important part of the human cultural heritage, why have we forgotten them, if indeed we have? will approach these questions historically, following the long, drawn-out struggle over ecstatic rituals from ancient times to the present. Everyone is vaguely aware of the decline of community human societies have endured in the last few centuries, a development many social scientists have analyzed in depth. Here we are looking at a much sharper, more intense form of pleasure than anything implied by the word *community*, with its evocations of coziness and small-town sociability. The loss of *ecstatic* pleasure, of the kind once routinely generated by rituals involving dancing, music, and so on, deserves the same attention accorded to *community*, and to be equally mourned.

This sense of loss has, in my case, a personal dimension. Intellectually, the roots of this book lie in a prior book, *Blood Rites: Origins and History of the Passions of War*. In that book I explored the dark side of human collective excitement, as expressed in rites of human sacrifice and war. As I ventured into the less destructive kinds of festivities that concern us here, I recognized emotional themes I had encountered decades ago, at rock concerts, informal parties, and organized “happenings.” I suspect that many readers will have similar points of reference—whether religious or “recreational”—for the material in this book, and will be willing to ask with me: If we possess this capacity for collective ecstasy, why do we so seldom put it to use?



---

# 1

## The Archaic Roots of Ecstasy

Go back ten thousand years and you will find humans toiling away at the many mundane activities required for survival: hunting, food gathering, making weapons and garments, beginning to experiment with agriculture. But if you land on the right moonlit night or seasonal turning point, you might also find them engaged in what seems, by comparison, to be a gratuitous waste of energy: dancing in lines or circles, sometimes wearing masks or what appear to be costumes, often waving branches or sticks. Most likely, both sexes would be dancing, each in its separate line or circle. Their faces and bodies might be painted with red ochre, or so archaeologists guess from the widespread presence of that colored ore in the sites of human settlements. The scene, in other words, might not be too different from the “savage” rituals encountered by nineteenth-century Westerners among native peoples of the world.

We can infer these scenes from prehistoric rock art depicting dancing figures, which has been discovered at sites in Africa, India, Australia, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Egypt, among other places. Whatever else they did, our distant ancestors seemed to find plenty of time for the kinds of activities the anthropologist Victor Turner described as liminal, or peripheral to the main business of life.

Festive dancing was not a rare or incidental subject for prehistoric artists. The Israeli archaeologist Yosef Garfinkel asserts that dancing scenes “were a most popular, indeed almost the only, subject used to describe interaction between people in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods.”<sup>1</sup> When such danced rituals originated is not known, but there is evidence that they may go back well into the Paleolithic era, or Stone Age. At one recently discovered site in England, drawings on the ceiling of a cave show “conga lines” of female dancers, along with drawings of animals like bison and ibex, which are known to have become extinct in England ten thousand years ago.<sup>2</sup> So well before people had written language, and possibly before they took up a settled lifestyle, they danced and understood dancing as an activity important enough to record on stone.

It is not easy to read the excitement of a danced ritual into prehistoric drawings. The figures are highly stylized; many of those cataloged by Garfinkel are little more than stick figures or silhouettes. A few possess facial features or anything like a facial expression. Even the identification of them as *dancers* takes some interpretive work; the figures have to be using their limbs in ways not associated with normal activities: holding their arms up, holding hands in a circle, raising their legs, or leaping, for example. Yet even in these crude, two-dimensional depictions, some of the recognizable ingredients of more recent festive traditions shine through—masking and costuming, for example. Some of the male figures wear masks in the form of animal heads or abstract designs; other dancers wear what archaeologists interpret as “costumes,” such as leopard skins. In the clearest sign of motion, and possibly excitement, some of the figures have long, flowing hair standing out from their heads, as if they are moving rapidly and tossing their heads to some long-silenced drumbeat.

Clearly, danced rituals did not seem like a waste of energy to prehistoric peoples. They took the time to fashion masks and costumes; they wantonly expended calories in the execution of the dance; they preferred to record these scenes over any other group activity. Thus anthropologist Victor

Turner's consignment of danced ritual to an occasional, marginal, or liminal status seems especially unwarranted in the prehistoric case—and more representative of the production-oriented mentality of our own industrial age than of prehistoric priorities. Surely these people knew hardship and were often threatened by food shortages, disease, and wild animals. But ritual, of a danced and possibly ecstatic nature, was central to their lives. Perhaps only because our own lives, so much easier in many ways, are also so constrained by the imperative to work, we have to wonder *why*.

Anthropologists tend to agree that the evolutionary function of dance was to enable—or encourage—humans to live in groups larger than small bands of closely related individuals. The advantage of a larger group size is presumed to be the same as it is for those primates who still live in the wild. Larger groups are better able to defend themselves against predators. Unlike most animals—antelopes, for example—primates are capable of mounting a group defense: mobbing the intruding predator, threatening it with branches, or at least attempting to scare it off by making an infernal racket. In the case of early humans, the danger may have come not only from predatory animals like the big cats but from other now-extinct hominids or even from fellow *Homo sapiens* bent on raiding. And of course, in the human case, the forms of defense would have included fire, rocks, and sharpened sticks. But the first line of defense was to come together as a group.

In his justly popular book *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar argues for an optimal Paleolithic group size of about 150. He speculates that speech—the *gossip* in his title—may have helped bind humans into groups of that size, much as mutual grooming—picking insects and bits of dirt out of each other's hair—appears to do in the case of other primates. But although it does not appear in his title, it is in fact *dance* that he invokes to hold these early human groups together. The problem with speech, according to Dunbar, is “its complete inadequacy at the emotional level”:

Just as we were acquiring the ability to argue and rationalize, we needed a more primitive emotional mechanism to bond our large groups ... Something deeper and more emotional was needed to overpower the cold logic of verbal arguments. It seems that we needed music and physical touch to do that.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, he sees language as subservient to danced rituals—“a way to formalize their spontaneity and provide them with a “metaphysical or religious significance.” And it should be noted that while hundreds of prehistoric images of dancing figures have been found, there are no rock drawings of still figures apparently engaged in conversation.

Dunbar is not the only one to see group dancing—especially in lines and circles—as the great leveler and binder of human communities, uniting all who participate in the kind of *communitas* that Turner found in twentieth-century native rituals. Interestingly, the Greek word *nomos*, meaning “law,” also has the musical meaning of “melody.” To submit, bodily, to the music through dance is to be incorporated into the community in a way far deeper than shared myth or common custom can achieve. In synchronous movement to music or chanting voices, the petty rivalries and factional differences that might divide a group could be transmuted into harmless competition over one's prowess as a dancer, or forgotten. “Dance,” as a neuroscientist put it, is “the biotechnology of group formation.”<sup>d</sup>

Thus groups—and the individuals within them—capable of holding themselves together through

dance would have had an evolutionary advantage over more weakly bonded groups and individuals—the advantage of being better able to mount a collective defense against any animals or hostile humans who encroached on their territory or otherwise threatened them. No other species ever figured out how to do this. Birds have their signature songs; fireflies can synchronize their light displays; chimpanzees sometimes stamp around together and wave their arms in what ethologists describe as a “carnival dance.” But if any other animals create music and move in synchrony to it, they have kept this talent well hidden from humans. We alone are gifted with the kind of love that Freud was unable to imagine: love, or at least affinity, holding people together in groups much larger than two.

Of course dance cannot work to bind people unless (1) it is intrinsically pleasurable, and (2) it provides a kind of pleasure not achievable by smaller groups.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the ritual dancers at prehistoric times thought they were doing—healing divisions in the group or preparing for the next encounter with their foes—they were also doing something that they liked to do and liked enough to invest considerable energy in. Practitioners of ecstatic dances in “native” societies attested to the pleasures of their rituals; so can any modern Westerners who have participated in the dances and other rhythmic activities associated with rock concerts, raves, or the current club scene. As the historian William H. McNeill pointed out in his book *Keeping Together in Time*, there is a deep satisfaction—even a thrill—to the simplest synchronous group activities, like marching or chanting together. He writes of his experience as a young soldier drilling during basic training for World War II.

Words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison that drilling involved. A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, we tend to enjoy rhythmic music and may be so aroused by watching others dance that we have a hard time keeping ourselves from jumping in. As some Western observers of native or enslaved people’s rituals observed, dancing is contagious; humans experience strong desires to synchronize their own bodies’ motions with those of others. The stimuli, which can be auditory or visual or derived from an internal sense of one’s own muscular response to the rhythm, can, in one psychiatrist’s summary of the research, “drive cortical rhythms and eventually produce an intensely pleasurable, ineffable experience in humans.”<sup>6</sup>

Why should humans be rewarded so generously for moving their bodies together in time? We are also pleurably rewarded for sexual activity, and it is easy to figure out why: Individuals who fail to engage in sex, or heterosexual intercourse anyway, leave no genetic trace. When nature requires us to do something—like eating or having sex—it kindly wires our brains to make that activity enjoyable. Synchronous rhythmic activity was, in fact, important to human collective defense, natural selection might have favored those individuals who found such activity pleasurable. In other words, evolution would have led to stronger neural connections between the motor centers that control motion, the visual centers that report on the motions of others, and the sites of pleasure in the limbic system of the brain. The joy of the rhythmic activity would have helped overcome the fear of confronting predators and other threats, just as marching music has pumped up soldiers in historical times.

We do not yet understand the neuronal basis of this pleasure, but an interesting line of speculation

has opened up only recently. Humans are highly imitative creatures, more so even than monkeys and others of our primate cousins. As all parents learn, to their amazement, an infant can respond to a smile with a smile, or stick out its tongue when a parent does. How does an infant transform the visual image of a protruding tongue into the muscular actions required to make its own tongue stick out? The answer may lie in the discovery of *mirror neurons*, nerve cells that fire both when an action is perceived—when the parent sticks out his tongue, for example—and when it is performed by the perceiver.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the perception of an action is closely tied to the execution of the same action by the beholder. We cannot see a dancer, for example, without unconsciously starting up the neural processes that are the basis of our own participation in the dance. As the neuroscientist Marc Kinsbourne writes:

Perceived behavior gives a leg up to more of the same in the observer, who becomes a participant ... The rhythm of the drum drowns out independent judgment and induces a reversion to the primordial state. To cite [Walter J.] Freeman ... “to dance is to engage in rhythmic movements that invite corresponding movements from others.” Dancers synchronize, reciprocate, or alternate—all of which are forms of entrainment open to the infant. Entraining with others into a shared rhythm—marching, chanting, dancing—may trigger a primitive sense of irrational and beguiling belonging, and a shared mindset.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to point out, though, that dance does not simply merge the individual into the group in the regressive way that Kinsbourne seems to imply. This is a common Western prejudice, but as pointed out in the introduction, dancers in existing “traditional” societies often devote great effort to composing music for the dance, perfecting their dance steps or other moves, and preparing the costumes or other body decorations. They may experience self-loss in the dance, or a kind of merger with the group, but they also seek a chance to shine, as individuals, for their skills and talents. There may even have been what evolutionary biologists call sexual selection for the ability to dance well, at least make a good appearance at the dance—just as there appears to have been sexual selection for males with deep voices and females with hourglass figures. The ability to dance or make music is not confined to a single sex, but we are often attracted to individuals who excel at these activities, and they could have given them a definite reproductive advantage.

In fact, the seasonal rituals and festivities of larger groups—several hundred people from different bands or subgroups gathering at an astronomically determined time—probably also served a reproductive function, providing an opportunity to find a mate outside of one’s close circle of kin. In this endeavor, talent at music and dance might well have been an asset. At least such a possibility is suggested by a study of young, unmarried Samburu men in Kenya in recent times.

These “odd men out,” suspended between boyhood and adulthood in an uncomfortably prolonged adolescence, regularly go into trance, shaking with extreme bodily agitation, in frustrating situations. Typical precipitating circumstances are those where one group of [such young men] is outdanced by a rival group in front of girls.<sup>9</sup>

---

To be “outdanced” is to risk reproductive failure, probably for the deeper evolutionary reason that the “girls” will, at some unconscious level, judge you less capable of participating in group defense.

I cannot leave the subject of evolution, though, without throwing in my own speculation about the adaptive value of music and dance. Dunbar and others emphasize their role in keeping people together in sizable groups, but they may once have served the function of group defense in a far more direct way. Like primates in the wild today, early humans probably faced off predatory animals collectively—banding together in a tight group, stamping their feet, shouting, and waving sticks or branches. In our own time, for example, hikers are often advised to try to repel bears they encounter in the wild with the same sorts of behavior, with the arm and stick waving being recommended as a way of exaggerating the humans’ height. At some point, early humans or hominids may have learned to synchronize their stampings and stick-wavings in the face of a predator, and the core of my speculation is that the predator might be tricked by this synchronous behavior into thinking that it faced—not a group of individually weak and defenseless humans—but a single, very large animal. When sticks are being brandished and feet stamped in unison, probably accompanied by synchronized chanting or shouting, it would be easy for an animal observer to conclude that only a single mind, or at least a single nervous system, is at work. Better, from the predator’s point of view, to wait to catch a human alone than to tangle with what appears to be a twenty-foot-long, noisy, multilegged beast.<sup>e</sup>

This form of confrontation might well have carried over into communal forms of hunting, in which game animals are driven by the human group into nets or cul de sacs or over cliffs. Many of the game animals hunted by prehistoric humans—like bison and aurochs—were themselves dangerous, and to confront them required courage. In communal hunting, the entire group—men, women, and children—advances against a herd of game animals, shouting, stamping, and waving sticks or torches. The archaeological evidence suggests that this form of hunting goes back to the Paleolithic era and possibly predates the practice of stalking individual animals by small groups of men.<sup>10</sup> As a collective defense against predatory animals, synchronous movement could have augmented the human group’s effectiveness—making it appear to be a single, oversized antagonist.

Various features of the prehistoric dancing revealed in rock art are consistent with this hypothesis. The prehistoric dancing figures often sport high headgear or head-expanding masks, often in the form of animal faces; they wave branches above their heads. One can imagine danced rituals originating as reenactments of successful animal encounters, serving both to build group cohesion for the next encounter and to instruct the young in how the human group had learned to prevail and survive.

Over time, as communal hunting waned and the threat of animal predators declined, the thrill of the human triumph over animals could still be reinvented as ritual. Through rhythm, people had learned to weld themselves into a single unit of motion meant to project their collective strength and terrify the animals they hunted or that hunted them. Taken individually, humans are fragile, vulnerable, clawless creatures. But banded together through rhythm and enlarged through the artifice of masks and sticks, the group can feel—and perhaps appear—to be as formidable as any nonhuman beast. When we speak of transcendent experience in terms of “feeling part of something larger than ourselves,” it may be this ancient many-headed pseudocreature that we unconsciously invoke.

## *The God of Ecstasy*

Once we leave the realm of speculation that is prehistory and enter the historical period, beginning

roughly five thousand years ago, written records and abundant works of art provide a firmer basis for understanding human cultures. We know from these writings and artifacts that danced rituals persisted into the early phases of civilization—a condition marked by the rise of agriculture, cities, social hierarchies, and, eventually, writing. Vase and wall paintings depicting lines and circles of dancers have been found in ancient Mesopotamian, Greek, Indian, and Palestinian archaeological sites. Rural people in ancient China danced in separate lines of men and women, and observed ecstatic rituals well into historical times. As the French scholar of Chinese history Marcel Granet reported:

The festivals of the winter season had a dramatic character. Extreme excitement was general. Even in the day of Confucius, those who took part were all “like madmen” (meaning that they felt themselves filled with a divine spirit) ... Dances, to the sound of clay timbrels, induced a state of ecstasy. Drunkenness brought it to perfection. The exorcists [a kind of shaman] wore the skins of animals. Animal dances were performed.<sup>11</sup>

In the ancient Near East, the Old Testament makes it clear that the ancient Hebrews enjoyed a robust tradition of festive dancing, usually associated with feasting and wine-drinking. In Exodus, for example, Miriam the prophetess takes “a timbrel [tambourine] in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.” When the Israelite forces returned from their victory over the Philistines, “the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick” (1 Samuel 18:6). It is not clear whether the officially approved rites and dances achieved an intensity that could be called ecstatic. One historian has concluded that “orgiastic, vigorous ecstasy is alien to the Israelite prophets,” who instead experience “a calm, sometimes paralytically calm, seeing and hearing of the word of YHWH.”<sup>12</sup> But as Garfinkel observes, the Hebrew word *hag* means both “festival” and to “go in a circle”—suggesting that the primordial form of many traditional Jewish festivals was the circle dance.<sup>13</sup>

There was, without question, a tradition of collective ecstasy among the Hebrews, but it was hardly officially approved. In fact, we know of it only through its opponents, the worshippers of Yahweh who wrote the Old Testament. This was the old polytheistic religion associated with Israel’s indigenous Canaanites, centered on Mesopotamian deities like Baal and the goddesses Anat and Asherah, and featuring what seem to have been mass ecstatic rites, the nature of which we can only guess at. Idolatry, drunkenness, and sexual orgies are described or hinted at, and possibly human sacrifice; at least that seems to have been the crime committed by King Asa’s goddess-worshipping grandmother who lost “the honor of being a great lady because she had committed a horror for Asherah.”<sup>14</sup> How much of these charges was slanderous there is no way of knowing, but something was going on generation after generation, that horrified Yahweh’s faithful. Centuries after Moses delivered the commandment to worship only the one God, Yahweh, the prophets were still railing against the old religious ways. The Hebrews couldn’t keep themselves from backsliding and were apparently performing the forbidden goddess-centered rites as late as the fifth century BCE.<sup>15</sup>

But it was the Greeks, the supposedly most rational and “Western” of ancient peoples, who left us the clearest evidence of ecstatic ritual behavior, verging on the dangerously disruptive. Dancing, whether of the ecstatic or more stately variety, was a central and defining activity of the ancient Greek community: line and circle dances, dances of young men or young women or both together, dances

regularly scheduled festivities or what appear to have been spontaneous outbreaks, dances for victory for the gods, or for the sheer fun of it.<sup>16</sup> In myth, Theseus leads the young men and women he has freed from the Minotaur in a circle dance performed with “crane steps,” imitating the high-stepping wading bird.<sup>17</sup> In Homer’s account of the heroic age, we learn that young Greeks danced “at marriages, at vintage, or simply to give vent to their youthful exuberance—*choreia* [dance], the Greeks think, must come from *chara*, ‘joy.’”<sup>18</sup> Achilles’ shield bore the image, not of some terrifying predator, but of a scene that must have seemed, to his homesick comrades in arms, quintessentially Greek.

There were youths dancing, and maidens of costly wooing, their hands upon one another’s wrists ... And now would they run round with deft feet exceeding lightly ... and now anon they would run in lines to meet each other. And a great company stood round the lovely dance in joy; and among them a divine minstrel was making music on his lyre, and through the midst of them, leading the measure, two tumblers whirled.<sup>19</sup>

Dance was a ubiquitous theme of ancient Greek art. Dancing figures commonly graced their vases and the great dramas of classical times were musical performances in which the chorus danced as well as sang. In fact the word *tragedy* is derived from words meaning goat and song, and the chorus was originally composed of men dressed in goatskins to resemble the satyrs—half men and half goat—who danced attendance on their master, the god Dionysus.

To an extent we can only guess at today, the religion of the ancient Greeks was a “danced religion” much like those of the “savages” European travelers were later to discover around the world. As Aldous Huxley once observed, “Ritual dances provide a religious experience that seems more satisfying and convincing than any other ... It is with their muscles that humans most easily obtain knowledge of the divine.”<sup>20</sup>

Lillian Lawler, writing in the 1960s, leaves no doubt that ecstatic dancing was indigenous to the mainstream Greek tradition, in, for example, the worship of Artemis, goddess of childbirth and the hunt. *Tympana*, or kettle drums, have been found at the shrine of Artemis Limnatis in southern Greece and this instrument, Lawler claims, was “helpful in inducing frenzy.” Dances to Artemis were known to be especially wild in Sparta—though whether in a religious or sexual sense we do not know, only that women and girls danced wearing “only one chiton,” or the equivalent of a slip.<sup>21</sup>

Within the ancient Western world, many deities served as the objects of ecstatic worship: in Greece, Artemis and Demeter; in Rome, the imported deities Isis (from Egypt), Cybele, the Great Mother, or Magna Mater (from Asia Minor), and Mithras (from Persia). But there was one Greek god for whom ecstatic worship was not simply an option; it was a requirement. To ignore his call was to risk a fate far worse than death or even physical torture; those who resisted him would be driven mad and forced to destroy their own children. This god, source of both ecstasy and terror, was Dionysus, or, as he was known to the Romans, Bacchus. His mundane jurisdiction covered vineyards and wine, but his most spiritual responsibility was to preside over the *orgeia* (literally, rites performed in the forest at night from which we derive the word *orgy*), where his devotees danced themselves into a state of trance. The fact that the Greeks felt the need for such a deity tells us something about the importance of the ecstatic experience in their world; just as their pantheon included gods for love, for war, for agriculture, metalworking, and hunting, they needed a god to give the experience of ecstasy a human

form and face.

Far more so than most of his fellow deities, Dionysus was an accessible and democratic god, whose *thiasos*, or sacred band, stood open to the humble as well as the mighty.<sup>22</sup> As Nietzsche envisioned his rites: “Now the slave emerges as a freeman; all the rigid, hostile walls which either necessity or despotism has erected between men are shattered.”<sup>23</sup> It was Nietzsche, of all the European classicists and scholars, who emphasized the Dionysian roots of ancient Greek drama, who saw the mad, ecstatic inspiration behind the Greeks’ stately art—who, metaphorically speaking, dared consider not just the deathless symmetry of the vase but the wild dancing figures painted on its surface. What the gods demanded, according to Nietzsche, was nothing less than the human soul, released by ecstatic ritual from the “horror of individual existence” into the “mystical Oneness” of rhythmic unity in the dance.<sup>24</sup>

Women, above all, responded to Dionysus’s call. In fact, the association between the god and his band of female devotees is so strong that it’s worth underscoring the fact that men also worshipped him, whether at village festivals to celebrate the new wine or by piously getting drunk together in the honor of the god. But Dionysus had a special appeal to the women of the Greek city-state, who were ordinarily excluded from much of public life. While men plotted wars or devised philosophies, women’s activities were largely confined to the domestic sphere, and boys still young enough to be kept in the women’s quarters were said to live “in darkness,” barred from the pleasures and challenges of public life. In many Greek cities, women were not even allowed to drink wine.<sup>25</sup>

The most notorious feminine form of Dionysian worship, the *oreibaia*, or winter dance, looks to modern eyes like a crude pantomime of feminist revolt. In mythical accounts, women “called” by the god to participate drop their spinning and abandon their children to run outdoors and into the mountains, where they dress in fawn skins and engage in a “frenzied dance.” These maenads, Dionysus’s female cult members were called, run through the woods calling out the name of the god or uttering the characteristic bacchic cry “*euoi*,” they toss their hair and brandish their *thyrsos*—sticks to which pinecones have been attached. Finally, they achieve a state of mind the Greeks called *enthousiasmos*—literally, having the god within oneself—or what many cultures in our own time would call a “possession trance.” These were not solely mythical events; in some times and places, the *oreibasias* was officially condoned and scheduled for every other year, in the dead of winter. Pausanias, who wrote in the second century CE, tells of a party of maenads who reached the eight-thousand-foot summit of Mt. Parnassus—an impressive athletic achievement, especially if performed in the winter—and Plutarch wrote of an occasion when a group of female worshippers were cut off by a snowstorm and had to be rescued.<sup>26</sup>

Dionysus was no respecter of ethnic boundaries. According to the archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, the worship of gods resembling Dionysus ranged over five thousand miles, from Portugal through North Africa to India, with the god appearing under various names, including “Bakkhos, Pan, Eleuthereus, Minotaur, Sabazios, Inuus, Faunus, Priapus, Liber, Ammon, Osiris, Shiva, Cerenunnus,” and, we might add, the delightfully named Etruscan analog of Dionysus: Fuflungs.<sup>27</sup> In his brilliant rendition of the Indian epics, for example, Roberto Calasso describes the Hindu god Shiva as “the stranger, this woman-stealer, this enemy of our rules and ties, this wanderer who loves the ashes of the dead, who speaks of things divine to the lowest of the low, this man who sometimes seems crazy, who has something obscene about him, who grows his hair long as a girl’s.”<sup>28</sup> Like Dionysus, Shiva bore an association with wine, his cult being “particularly widespread in the mountains where the vine is cultivated,” according to a Greek who lived in India in the fourth century BCE.<sup>29</sup>

In India, Krishna, too, exerted a Dionysian effect on women—especially those who worked as *gopis*, or cowherders, “charm[ing] them beyond caring by the sound of his flute in the forest, so that



- [The Political Economy of Global Capitalism and Crisis \(RIPE Series in Global Political Economy\) pdf](#)
- [click Roundabout at Bangalow: An Intimate Chronicle pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [The New Cambridge Medieval History \(Volume 1: c.500-c.700\) for free](#)
- [The Righteous Man \(Judge Dredd: Year Two Series, Book 1\) pdf](#)
  
- <http://nexson.arzamaszev.com/library/Introduction-to-Objectivist-Epistemology.pdf>
- <http://korplast.gr/lib/Roundabout-at-Bangalow--An-Intimate-Chronicle.pdf>
- <http://www.1973vision.com/?library/The-New-Cambridge-Medieval-History--Volume-1--c-500-c-700-.pdf>
- <http://ramazotti.ru/library/Low-Carb-is-LEKKER.pdf>