

France Schott-Billmann  
[fsbill@club-internet.fr](mailto:fsbill@club-internet.fr)

Ph.D. in Psychology, Psychoanalyst,  
Dance Therapist, teaches Dance-Therapy at the University Paris  
Descartes Sorbonne (master in art-therapy) .  
Dance Researcher.

Most recent publications in French

*Le Besoin de Danser* (Odile Jacob, 2001)

*Le Féminin et l'Amour de l'Autre* (Odile Jacob, 2006)

*Quand la Danse Guérit*, Courrier du Livre 2012.

In Italian : *Quando la Danza Guarisce*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2010

## SOME PRINCIPLES OF DANCE-RHYTHM- THERAPY

Dance-rhythm therapy, well developed in southern Europe and France is often unknown in Northern Europe and in the Anglo-Saxon countries. So I would like to recall here the basics.

This form of dance therapy is an extension of the traditional therapies of oral cultures, which were in the form of rituals and where dancing and music played an important role.

### 1. The shamanic ground of traditional therapies

The traditional therapies are rooted in the shamanic ground of humanity, which is universal and nourishes the later religions. It is an animistic worldview in which nature is animated, that is to say that there is a soul, a spirit in every part of nature. It is a Supernature.

In the Mediterranean and the Middle East, the deified Nature is Mother Earth that in Greece is called Gaia.

At this animistic worldview is attached a health system that is called shamanism which consists in contacting the spirit world, the invisible world through a state of trance.

It is this system that has developed in Greece the cult of Dionysus. Wild in Thrace, he mellowed in contact with Demeter and Persephone Goddesses in the Mysteries of Eleusis, which lasted more than 3000 years until 391 a.c., when it was banned by the Christian emperor of Byzantium, Theodosius.

The Mysteries were spread around the Mediterranean. They were secret cults which offered a philosophical and therapeutic practice based on the incarnation of gods through dance, music and theater. Trance in these Mysteries was called with the beautiful name of enthusiasm that means having the god inside oneself (en-theos). A large number of people were initiated in these Cults : even philosophers (Aristotle, Cicero) , Roman emperors as Hadrian, ordinary people, including women and slaves.

Of course, it is out of question to revive the past, but it is very useful to revisit these therapeutic cults in the light of today's knowledge.

Shamanism is not dead. It was integrated in the ancient Greek religion, then Christianity suppressed what it considered wild, that is to say trance. Trance then took refuge in the dance and then disappeared in the western regions of Europe. It was further maintained in the

eastern and southern regions. But it is still alive in all areas where shamanism still exists. Not only in Siberia, where the word shaman comes from, but among the Mongols, South Asia and East Indians in North and South America. In addition, shamanism has many common points with African and Caribbean possession cults, Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Santería, Haitian Voodoo, reviewed by Katherine Dunham, who is the ancestor of the technique we use in DRT.

Shamanism now takes revenge with a spectacular revival in the Western countries. With unfortunately many charlatans who have not studied, but who superficially use a few symbols, as magic formulas without any psycho-anthropological perspective.

## 2. The analysis of shamanism in anthropology and psychoanalysis

Freud showed that the unconscious expresses itself through symbols, as in dreams or in symbolic acts as parapraxes. It understands only the language of symbols. This is why it is not touched by rational words but it is sensitive to the art which speaks to it directly. What Nietzsche translated in this sentence: "The art was given to us in order not to die of the truth." He meant the illusory truth that makes us believe that the cause of our problems is in our biography: it is the fault of my father ... my mother ... my sister ...

If art speaks to our unconscious, it is because symbols, as explains the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-

Strauss<sup>1</sup>, are not only verbal metaphors, as the words are, but both sounds, rhythms, shapes, colors, gestures ...

The unconscious can not be translated into rational words. But it may be translated in music, dance, poetry, painting...

### 3. Tools of shamanism taken in DRT

Everywhere in the world, shamans use the same kind of tools who are at the same time symbolic, therapeutic and artistic

#### *a. The rhythm*

The shaman has always a drum, that he strikes regularly to accompany his story, his voice, his gestures.

The drum beat is both a vibration of air and an acoustic symbol of the heart beat. It touches the listener in both physical and symbolic terms. At the physical level, the vibration enters the body of the listener whose rhythms are synchronized with it<sup>2</sup>. At the symbolic level, it recalls the beating of the heart, the source of vital energy and blood circulation under repeated pressure of pulse. The beat, as the pulse does, pushes the listener to the movement and gives him « ants in the legs ».

---

<sup>1</sup> Lévi-Strauss Claude, *Anthropologie structurale*, chap. « L'efficacité symbolique », p. 213-234, Plon, 1958 et 1974, coll. Agora

<sup>2</sup> Synchronization governs galaxies, cells, ecosystems and organisms, in short everything that surrounds us and has its own dynamics involved in this vast game fit frequencies and phases. It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that the pace of the song and the patient adjust to each other by coordinating their frequencies.

The rhythmic couples in the songs of oral cultures induce a sensation of swaying into the body and symbolically remind breath. When you know the importance for the baby to be in contact with the breast of his mother, with her rhythms, her heartbeat (which can be replaced by recorded beats<sup>3</sup>), one can understand the invigorating effect on the patients, when hearing shaman's organic, primitive rhythms.

The rhythm of songs, dances, stories of shamans are those of all oral cultures. They are clocked, that is to say that they are constructed on a *pendulum* which combines the perception of a regular return of strong times with a rhythmic coupled swaying. These characteristics explain its therapeutic value:

- It is a dynamic *attractor*. The song awakes the patient's inner rhythms, draws his weakened energy and synchronizes in the *cadence* his pulse and his internal rhythms, up to his neurons ;
- It is a *regulator*. It orders the disordered inner rhythms by *synchronizing*. He channels the patient's chaotic energy flows, and homogenizes him, soothes him, directs him in the direction of healing;
- It is an *amplifier*. Thus, soldiers marching in cadence could break a bridge, because every synchronized step amplifies the movement given to the bridge until it is broken. This phenomenon of energy amplification that appears in the effect of synchronized repetition, is called *resonance*. It works everywhere in the universe. We can fairly safely assume that it works in human field too, to

---

<sup>3</sup> Morris Desmond, *Le Singe Nu*, Le Livre de Poche, Grasset, 1967.

move from one register to another and *reorganize rhythmically* the body, the unconscious and conscious thought.

*b. The archetypal symbols aiming to give meaning*

The technique we use is derived from the work of the Afro-American *Katherine Dunham* (1909-2006) who was both dancer, choreographer and anthropologist. She had done her thesis in anthropology on Haitian voodoo. Then, she opened a school in which she taught, among other disciplines, a technique she created herself, called *Primitive-Rhythms*. It was the result of interbreeding between the African dance of her ancestors, the Caribbean dances, and the dances of European origin. She also founded a company that bore her name (*Katherine Dunham's Company*) and presented in the U.S.A. her choreographies heavily inspired by Caribbean therapeutic rituals. Because she had studied particularly Haitian voodoo, thanks to her thesis and her initiation into the cult of the snake-god *Damballah*, she created choreographies that imitated the *descent of the gods in the body* of the sick persons in Haiti. Dancers repeated the actions of those gods, dancing in the body of the possessed and healing them by this way. In fact, the possession cults are a very effective method and Lacan and Jung have pointed out the therapeutic value of the gods to support the pathogenic impulses and give them an *outlet in a symbolic language*. But of course, there is no question of doing voodoo dance therapy, especially in France, a secular country if

any. Nevertheless nothing prevents from using the god's gestures for their symbolic value. The gods of the polytheistic societies represent the range of the main characters of the human being. We always meet a God of war (Ares in Greece Ogou in Haiti), a Goddess of love (Aphrodite, Erzulie,), a phallic God (Dionysus, Legba), a gGd of the dead (Hades, Baron Samedi ). They represent the major human drives. Actually they are *archetypes*.

Haitian dancer who was part of the Katerine Dunham's company, Hens Duplan, brought to France in 1970 a technique inspired by the choreographer. He taught it for 10 years at the American Center in Paris under the name *Primitive Expression*. This is the one we use in DRT.

Archetypes integrated in the rhythm will acquire synchronization and resonance, and will bring the participants into *a state of altered (expanded) consciousness* ; they become different, other than what they are daily. They experience *the enthusiastic state of consciousness*.

### *c. Enthusiasm*

The enthusiastic state is not like trance with loss of consciousness of possessed patients in voodoo. One still remains *present of himself*. One travels while remaining *fully aware*. We can call this form of trance "Mediterranean" since it was practiced here in Greece, not far from Athens, in Eleusis. And being mediterranean it is a moderate trance, in-between two

extremes : too much control and too much exuberance. It is Greek: "Miden agan" nothing too much. It channels the energy of God Dionysus to the ordered forms of Apollo. It reconciles the opposites.

It is collective : the shared rhythm connects the dancer with the group and permits, as Euripides used to say, to "bring the "souls together", celebrating altogether the rhythm of life, all of them enjoying the feeling of being alive ...

Rhythm connects also the dancer with himself by synchronizing the registers that constitute the human being. Rhythmic repetition of movements causes a resonance between the organic and the psychic body : the body, the unconscious and the conscious self, vibrate on the same rhythm, creating something new, an *other self* : the energy pushes the dancer beyond the limits of his body, but also the limits of his ego, and he reaches the unlimited field that extends beyond him, and then he becomes part of the mainstream of life browsing the universe. The gesture, "supernaturalized" by the rhythm, affects the dancer the way the spirits and gods affect the patient in traditional therapies. Through what anthropology calls *symbolic efficacy* they transform him, heal him.

Key-words, Shamanism, Beat, Cadence, Synchronization, Resonance, Trance, Enthusiasm, Archetypes.

## Bibliography :

Daraki Maria, *Dionysos et la Déesse Terre*, Paris, Champs, Flammarion, 1994.

Dunham Katerine, *Island possessed*, Chicago University Press, 1974.

Freud Sigmund, *Psychopathologie de la vie quotidienne*, Paris pbp, Payot 2003 (first edition 1901)

Lacan Jacques, *Séminaire XX, Encore*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Champ Freudien 1974.

Lévi-Strauss Claude, *Anthropologie structurale*, chap. « L'efficacité symbolique », Paris, Plon, coll. Agora 1974,

Morris Desmond, *Le Singe Nu*, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, Grasset, 1967.

Schott-Billmann France,  
*Le Besoin de Danser*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001.  
*Le Féminin et l'Amour de l'Autre*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2006.  
*Quand la Danse Guérit*, Paris, Courrier du Livre 2012.

Spineto Natale, *Les symboles dans l'histoire de l'humanité*, Editions du Rouergue 2003.