

Salpuri Exorcism and the Dancing Gene

Charlotte Babb

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Ritual and Initiation

Laura Kopplewitz

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Sound, particularly drumming, and dance are the means of choice in many cultures for achieving an altered state. According to Metzler, "There is some evidence that this method involves "auditory driving" or entrainment of cerebral electrical rhythms" (240). One such dance is the Salpuri, originally a ritual of exorcism, but now often performed as an example of indigenous Korean culture, with many practitioners traveling all over the world. The Salpuri starts out slow, then speeds up. Much of the motion is a graceful motion of the shoulders, not the wild, ecstatic dance that is sometimes associated with shamanism. (Heyman, par. 5) The identifying mark of this dance is the use of one or more scarves; the dance may be related to "the Scarf Dance" of China (Heyman). It is often performed after a ritual to release the soul of a dead person, to help the mourners. Heyman explains that:

it expresses such feelings as the loneliness, solitude, emptiness, pointlessness and futility of life and the hopeless yearning for immortality in the face of eventual death. Thereby is it a dance of regret or rue rather than one of joy. However, from within the depth of this rue, there pours forth an inner joy that produces a finesse, savoir - faire of dance technique that is unmatched elsewhere. (par. 3)

Why does drumming and dancing work so well to create these altered states in so many diverse cultures? Bachner-Melman et al suggest that all people are genetically hard-wired to dance and to respond to rhythmic music. As the researchers studied many dancers and athletes, they noted that in activities like the Korean Salpuri dance, "an ecstatic trance state is induced that results in changes in alpha wave activity" (Discussion, Par. 4) and they suggest that the dance satisfies " the need for altered consciousness states that subjects participating in and performing this art form sometimes have." (Discussion,

Par. 6) Using a psychological instrument, the TAS, they found that subjects who were proficient at dancing also scored highly on the TAS, suggesting that they were able to focus awareness in ways that allowed them to open to mystical and visionary experiences, possibly because the dancing and music caused serotonin receptors to be stimulated. (Discussion, par. 6) The effect of music and dancing is not limited to the actual experience, but rebounds in memory. The shaman "reaches the altered state of ecstatic trance through suppression of frontal cortex functions and activation of subcortical functions" according to results of EEGs on a Salpuri dancer at rest, listening to pop music and listening to Salpuri music (Park in Fachner & Rittner, 5, par. 20).

Bachner-Melman et. Al. suggest that the association between AVPR1a and dancing may "[reflect] the importance of social relations and communication in the dance form and contribute to molding social interactions from the molecular level to the dance floor;" (Discussion, Par. 3) showing that birds doing mating dances have similar brain chemical markers. But while the desire to dance may be hard-wired, shamans are able to use that altered state because "repeated findings of high Beta II elements illustrate that self-control is maintained in these methods of sound-induced trance and may even give way to a highly concentrated hyper alertness in the sense of an ergotropic trance." (Fachner & Rittner). Olsen suggests that music and training, with no stimulants or drugs, can create a "pure" trance that can be used for healing or destruction. (213) The shaman trained to operate in this state of hyper-alertness is able to control his or her own consciousness, while those who are come for healing or divination can be susceptible to suggestion as if they were under hypnosis. The common use of sleight of hand by

shamans to distract their clients allows them to change the clients' underlying attitudes and perceptions. In the Salpuri, the client sits still; the shaman dances.

Fenkl describes his wife's encounter with a *mansin*, a female Korean shaman, at a ceremony he was facilitating during a study tour in Korea. The wife squatted, covered by scarves while the shaman danced around her and stabbed the air with a knife around the wife's head. The wife reported being very disoriented and frightened, feeling disembodied as the shaman exorcised the spirits that were not allowing her to choose an auspicious color so that her questions could be answered. Fenkl reports also being in an "abstracted state" somewhere between his "amusement and ethnographer's interest" and "visceral fear" for his wife's safety despite his familiarity with shamans in various cultures. Even people who do not believe or who are not in the local culture are swept up in the near-trance state.

Similar stories appear in Narby & Huxley (2004). Thurn describes his experience: "I seemed to be suspended somewhere in a ceaselessly surging din; and my only thoughts were hardly felt wonder as to the cause of the noise, and a gentle, fruitless effort to remember if there had once been a time before noise was" (p. 45). Olsen reports that a shaman's song destroyed two tape recorders (p. 214). Hitchcock says that the "spell cast by [the shaman's] drumming and singing remained on us all" (p. 206). Kalwiet describes being "too deeply moved by the selfless abandon of the man" (p. 179) to attempt to observe carefully and objectively what is going on. But the shaman is aware and is consciously, carefully directing the process.

In my research, I ran across another mention of Salpuri music being used in an exorcism, in Antarctica by a visiting musician, Henry Kaiser. He had a shamanistic

experience playing his guitar in -40 degree weather using the South Pole as a slide and picking with his gloved hands. He stared into the white wilderness and found himself playing in time with the flapping of the flag nearby. Later on, he and some of the people stationed in Antarctica staged an exorcism of El Gran Chingazo, an ice-tunneling machine with 57% downtime. An altar had already been set up, and music was added:

Richard M. Nixon's ghostly face peered out from Chingazo's cab. The fragrant incense of diesel and oil filled the air. I prepared my guitar and amp next to Frederick's electric MIDI violin rig, the lights were turned out and many Pole folks entered the shop, chanting and playing drums. A high exorcism, with much shouting and dancing, followed; under the leadership of Bill and Big John. I did my best to provide a crashing hybrid of Texas Blues Guitar and Korean Salpuri Exorcism Guitar, as the MIDI violin exploded with screams and shrieks. Suddenly the unmistakable sound of bagpipes was heard and a piper marched in and joined the ceremony. Pole culture certainly is special. Perhaps the exorcism has been my most memorable experience on the ice? Maybe I took it too seriously, but as a long time listener of different types of trance-inducing, exorcism and shamanistic musics, it was easy to drift off into some other kind of consciousness. (Kaiser, par. 14)

The musician and the shaman are very aware of their altered states, and they work to perform their music and their magic for the betterment of all.

I wonder if many of the modern day ills—addictions, overwork, depression, cancer, allergies—are due to the relative cultural difficulty of participating in dance? If we are genetically disposed to respond to music—and people do, their toes tapping and their heads nodding--why is it so hard for people to dance in an environment saturated with music? Perhaps it is the very saturation of media—ipods, TV, radio and the Internet—that keep people from actually interacting or performing. We are always audience, watching, being hypnotized. Television in particular hypnotizes without the benefit of intent of healing its customers, although it can be "highly ritualistic and a type

of ritual medium in itself for the culture" (Bell, 245). All media, but especially television can create narrative mythos and image, but it discourages by default any participation and performance. It puts everyone in the outer court, watching the ritual from outside.

Last weekend I went to hear a local band play some hard rock and blues covers. Although we were in a coffee shop that was fairly crowded, my daughter and I got up and danced, simple freestyle bump and grind—no steps, no synchronized arm movements, no counting. Nobody else got up to join us, and since we were at the back of the listening room, we weren't blocking anyone's view of the band. It's good that the band likes us! I always experience a sense of altered consciousness when I am dancing—I close my eyes and embody the music. But I find that most people won't dance even in a similar situation unless they have been drinking.

I find it sad that the Salpuri dance is now performed rather than used as ritual, but I hope that it can exorcise some of the darkness and sorrow of the audience participants. Perhaps the dancers are stealth shamans, and they will hypnotize their audiences to "bust a move" and allow their serotonin receptors to overflow. Perhaps they can help bring joy.

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