

Chapter 2

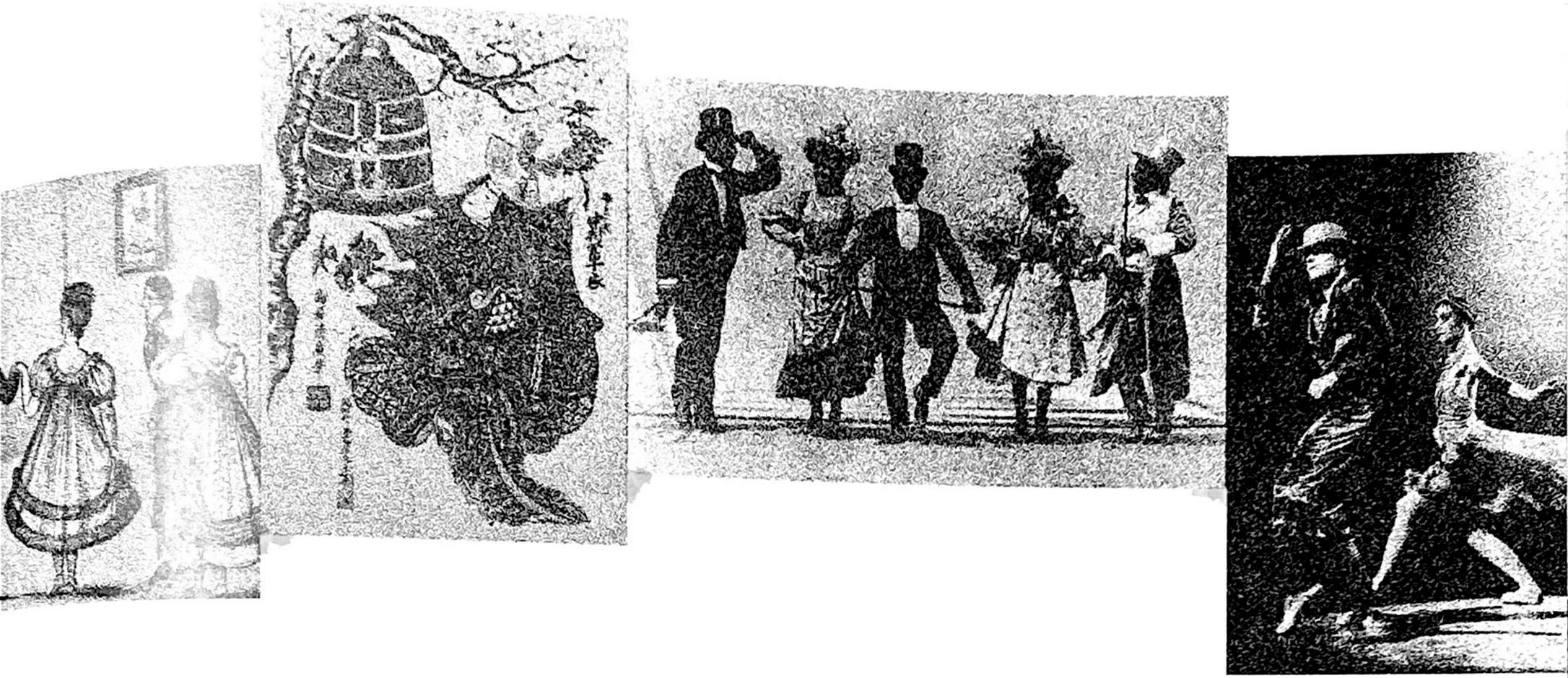
Lord of the Dance

In India, the gods dance. Shiva, the great Hindu god of creation and destruction who is worshiped throughout India, is classically represented as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance. Bronze icons found in south Indian temples and domestic shrines show a four-armed deity, ringed by fire, in the midst of what has been called Shiva's cosmic dance. In one hand he holds a drum, which symbolizes the sound that kindles creation; another hand cradles a ball of flame, symbol of destruction and renewal; his right leg, bent at the knee, crushes to earth the demon of ignorance; while his raised left leg, swung across his body, signifies the release from worldly cares that is one of the blessings dance bestows on its devotees the world over.

Shiva is by no means the only dancing god in the Hindu pantheon. Vishnu, the other great deity that Hindus worship, periodically takes on human form to rescue the world when it is threatened. He has long been worshiped in his incarnations as Rama and Krishna.

The latter, with his characteristic flute, is especially associated with dance; his legendary dalliances with village milkmaids inspired a tradition of sensual devotional dance that struck sympathetic chords far beyond the subcontinent. The *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, millennia-old Sanskrit epics celebrating the exploits of Rama and Krishna respectively, are held in reverence wherever Indian culture has left its mark; dance dramas based on these works, and on the epic known as the *Mahabharata*, are presented in ritual settings throughout southeast Asia. When the gods dance, it is not surprising that dance itself should be considered an offering to them.

Another important tradition of religious dance is found in Africa south of the Sahara and throughout the Western Hemisphere where enslaved Africans preserved and extended the religious practices of their ancestors, especially the Yoruba-speaking peoples of west Africa. From the Sango and egungun



ceremonies of Yorubaland in southwestern Nigeria to the candomblé of northeastern Brazil, the vodun of Haiti, and the santería of Cuba (and New York and Miami), dance opens direct channels of communication to the world of the gods and the ancestors. In some of these ceremonies, the goal is to “make a god within one’s body.” The initiate (who has undergone a long period of instruction and training) dances to invite a particular god to visit the world of the living. When the invitation is accepted, the god takes possession of the initiate’s body and begins dancing with characteristic movements and energy that other members of the religious community recognize as signaling the presence of that deity. During this time, the initiate remains in a state of suspended consciousness sometimes called *trance*. The Yoruba themselves speak of being “mounted” by a god. To be mounted is a transcendent experience that brings spiritual and material benefits to the individual and the entire community.

Day after day, night after night, under widely varying circumstances but with the same fierce conviction, dancing worshipers call upon the gods, and the gods come.

The basic vehicle of dance is the human body. When and how people dance is determined by their attitudes toward the body; such attitudes are powerfully shaped by religious beliefs. In both India and west Africa we find cultures where dance plays a central role in worship; the attitudes toward the dancing body that emerged from these cultures have strongly influenced other cultures around the world. The influence of Indian dance has been felt not just in Southeast Asia but as far away as China, Japan, and even, some scholars believe, the islands of the South Pacific. The enforced diaspora of large numbers of Yoruba from west Africa not only implanted a vigorous tradition of religious dance in the Caribbean and the Americas but also (as we will see when we trace its influence on social dancing

in the twentieth century) changed the way the rest of the world dances.

In contrast to the Hindu and Yoruba traditions, the Judeo-Christian world view has always been ambivalent about the religious uses of dance, an attitude that reflects a deeper ambivalence about the body that dances. The ancient Hebrews were surrounded by people for whom, in the words of historian E. Louis Backman, “dance was a means of influencing the invisible powers and of establishing contact with them.” The Hebrews shared this view of dance, but at the same time sought to distance themselves from the practices of their neighbors. Their ambivalence was passed along to the early Christians who combined it with another tradition of ambivalence about the dancing body that ran through Greek and Roman thought. The result was an internal debate between the proponents and opponents of Christian liturgical dance in which the opponents usually had the upper hand. Ultimately, removed from



consecrated ground, dance in the West flourished as a secular arena for social interaction and as the basis of a vigorous secular theater. Indeed, the split in the Christian world view between the sacred and the secular—a distinction that is profoundly alien to the Hindu and Yoruba traditions—may be related to Christianity's denial of the body as something holy in and of itself.

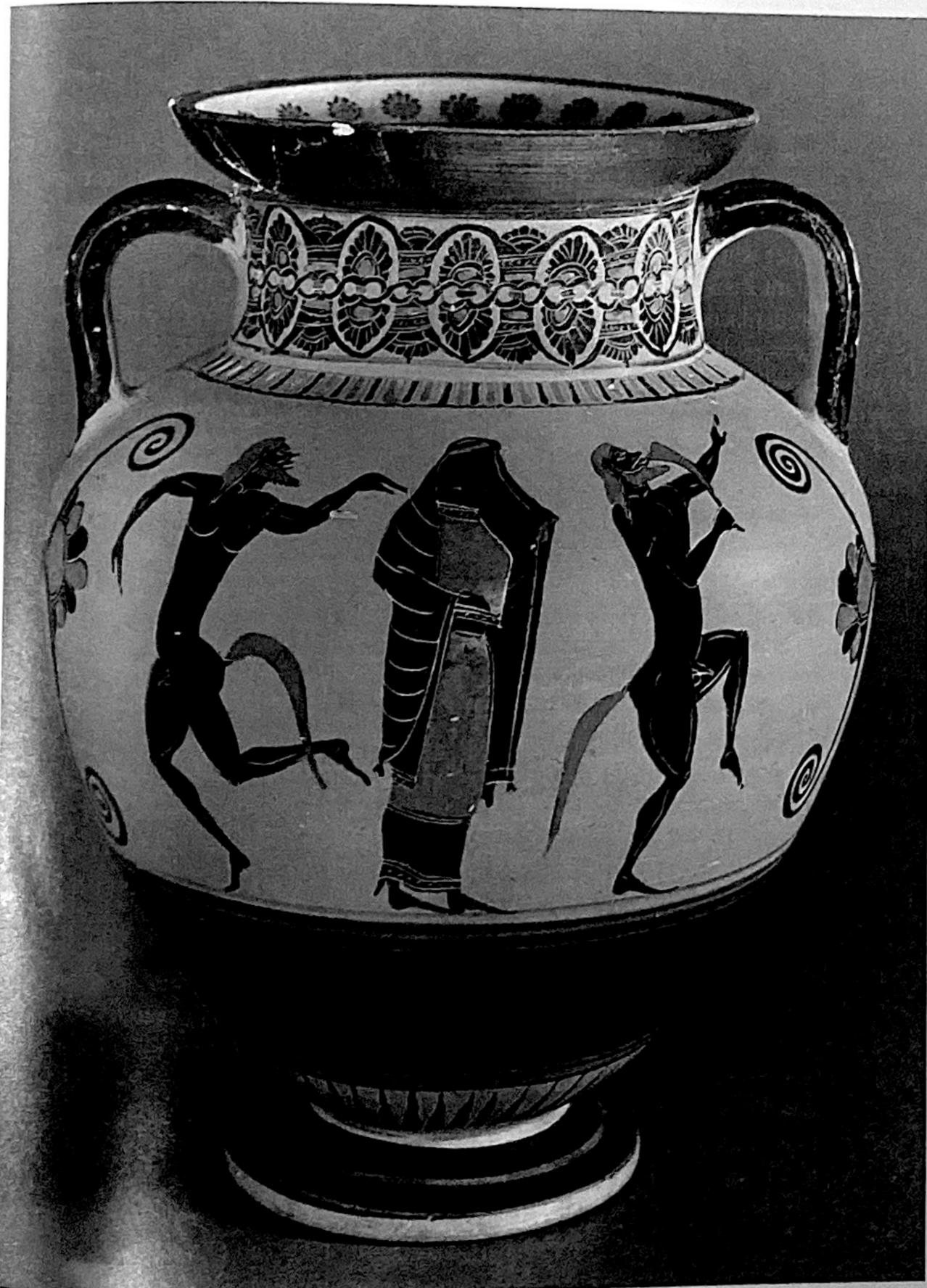
Judaism's ambivalence toward the dancing body is recorded in its earliest scriptures. From the beginning there was a right kind of dance and a wrong kind. After the Lord closed the Red Sea on the pursuing Egyptians, Miriam, sister of Moses, led the surviving Hebrews in a dance of thanksgiving (Exodus 15:20). King David, harpist, psalmist, warrior, and lover, once danced "with all his might" before the Ark of the Covenant (II Samuel 6:14–16); when his wife mocked him for it, she was punished with barrenness. Psalm 149 exhorts, "Let them praise His name in the dance"; some scholars maintain that all the psalms were originally meant to be

danced, by groups of worshipers, as well as sung. A close examination of these texts suggests that the dances of praise included processions and circle dances, with hopping, whirling, and stamping steps. Yet when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law and found his people worshiping a golden calf in the Lord's place, the fact that they were singing and dancing is especially noted, as if to sum up the horror of their idolatry (Exodus 32:19). This was, definitively, the wrong kind of dance.

As Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is a time to dance (3:4). The Talmud (500 B.C.) says that the angels dance in heaven; and according to rabbinic laws, dancing at a wedding is a mitzvah, a commandment of Jewish life; Jews must dance at weddings. It is possible that this injunction gave rise to the profession of dancing instructor; history tells us that Jewish dancing instructors played an important role in the spread of social dancing in early Renaissance Europe. But devotional dance, dance as an integral part of the worship of God, was something else again. The religious

rituals of the ancient Hebrews were clearly influenced by their encounters with the pagans who lived in lands that the descendants of Abraham claimed by divine right. These pagans regarded dance as an essential element of their religious practices. Scholars may argue over which dances the ancient Hebrews performed at which festivals, but the emphasis throughout the Hebrew scriptures is on approaching the divine through words rather than movement. As a transcendent deity, the Lord of the Hebrews could not be envisioned in any graven image, much less one that danced. The contrast to Hindu and west African (as well as Greek and Roman) iconography is telling. The Israelites made room for dance in their daily life and in their seasonal festivals. But compared to the detailed injunctions about how to conduct sacrifices and wars and business and domestic affairs, the references to dance in the Hebrew scriptures seem both modest and restrained. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the priests, prophets, and lawgivers were taking care to discourage the fervent, not to say frenzied, dancing associated

Opposite: Christian iconography provided Renaissance painters few opportunities to portray dance. One was the Biblical story of the worship of the golden calf, which has various possible origins in antiquity. Filippino Lippi's *Worship of the Egyptian Bull-God, Apis*, c. 1500, a reconstruction of a pre-Christian Egyptian cult centered in Memphis, shows pagan religious dancing. The cult of the sacred bull Apis was so widespread that it was given official recognition under the Ptolemaic and Roman rulers of Egypt, and its feast days were celebrated throughout the country.



Among the Greeks, dance was frequently associated with Dionysian revels. Inspired by Dionysus to ecstatic frenzies of singing and dancing, Maenads (top) existed beyond all human conventions. Sileni (left) were woodland creatures who also were drawn into the circle of Dionysus. Not all orgiastic dancers were followers of Dionysus, however. The dancers above are thought to be worshipping the god Apollo Karneios, a deity presumed to be a synthesis of the Greek Apollo with a still-older god called Karneios. These examples are drawn from vase paintings of c. 540–415 B.C.

"The true purpose of Art
was to reveal the Good,
The Beautiful"

"Dancing is
as old
as love"

Outside of Dionysian and other orgiastic cults, Greek dance developed as an orderly, communal form called choral dance. The chorus, or line of dancers, would move either circularly or in straight ranks. These stately rows of figures are familiar from both Greek and Roman bas-reliefs on monuments, and, indeed, choral dance is particularly suited to depiction in decorative sculpture. This relief, a Roman copy of c. A.D. 100 of an older Greek original, portrays Athenian maidens at the annual festival of Panathenaea, dedicated to Athena, which comprised a procession, sacrifices, and games.

with religious worship among their neighbors—especially those forms of dance that brought men and women together in ways that could excite lascivious thoughts.

The ambivalence toward the dancing body found in Greek and Roman thought sprang from different roots. Like the Mycenaeans, the Minoans, and the Egyptians before them, the Greeks danced at religious ceremonies; they danced to insure fertile fields and fertile women; they danced to prepare for war and to celebrate victories; they danced at weddings and funerals; they danced to overcome depression and to cure physical illness. Yet they were also aware that the energies released in the wilder forms of dance could threaten the established order—as exemplified in myth by the dance-intoxicated devotees of Dionysus who did violence to members of their own families. There was obviously a need to channel such energies into constructive channels under the control of the community. An example of how the Greeks dealt with this problem can be seen in the evolution of the danced revels of Dionysus into the classical theater of Athens, where the old myths were acted out in the plays of Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.), Sophocles (495–406 B.C.), and Euripides (480–406 B.C.).

According to the Greeks, Dionysus, a nature god identified with the vine, came from "the East." In adopting the rites of Dionysus with such ardor, the

Greeks were only reaffirming the importance of dance in their own mythical past. In Greek cosmology, Zeus, first among the Olympian gods, owed his very survival to dance. Hidden away from his father who was trying to kill him, the infant Zeus began to cry; before his hiding place could be discovered, his cries were drowned out by the clashing swords and shields of the loyal Curetes—semidivine beings later associated with the wildly dancing devotees of Dionysian cults. Dancing figures adorn the earliest Greek pottery. The Greeks had a single word—*musike*—for song, dance, and instrumental music; the evidence suggests that they never sang or chanted without moving their bodies.

Processions of dancers led by the priests of Dionysus figured prominently in the great spring festival at Athens. During the sixth century B.C. these processions were gradually transformed into choral competitions, which in turn developed into dramatic competitions. Each type of presentation—tragedy, comedy, the satyr play—had its characteristic dances, some staid and solemn, some featuring lewd miming with phallic props. But the precise mix of words and body movements remains a mystery; no one today knows what the plays of the Athenian dramatists looked and sounded like in production. In place of precise descriptions, we have the analytical writings of philosophers like Plato (427–347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322

B.C.), who left an elaborate literature of dance theory and criticism. Unanimous in recognizing the power of dance (both constructive and disruptive) in their society, they disagreed on how such power could be wielded safely under the overall control of reason. Their ambivalence has colored Western attitudes toward dance ever since.

Plato agreed with his mentor Socrates that every educated man should know how to dance gracefully—by which he meant the manly exercises that kept a body strong and supple and ready to do its duty on the battlefield should war threaten the city-state. The pyrrhic, or weapon, dance (a form of mock combat borrowed from Crete and perfected in Sparta) was the ideal, although choral dances with modest, beautiful movements were also acceptable to Plato because they made manifest to the dancer the order that rules the cosmos. The true purpose of art (as of philosophy) was to reveal the Good, the Beautiful. He deplored the "dirty dancing" of his day. In general, steps that stayed close to the ground were preferable to leaping and jumping, and group dancing was safer than solo performances. Plato knew that the wilder forms of dance could induce trance and possession, with unpredictable results, and rouse the sexual passions, with all too predictable results. To be on the safe side, he banished professional actor-dancers from his ideal republic.



Plato's philosophical quarrel with dance drama was that, like all representational art, it showed events contrary to fact; the performers were not actually feeling what they pretended to feel. In banning professionals from the stage, Plato was willing to forgo the benefits that only trained performers can bring to dance: the ability to focus every resource of the body—every limb, joint, sense, and sinew—on a specific task of expression or communication. For Aristotle, the benefits of professionalism outweighed the drawbacks. By dance Aristotle understood the representation of the actions and passions of men through rhythmic movements. He argued that all Greek citizens had an obligation to attend well-executed dance performances, since dance, like poetry, could teach important lessons through imitation of real-life events, and especially through the "purging" of the emotions of pity and terror. Yet Aristotle also feared the corrupting influence of a life devoted exclusively to dance. In order to spare his fellow Greeks this risk, he urged that the profession of dancer be reserved for slaves, ex-slaves, and foreigners.

The picture of classical Greece that historians paint for us is full of anomalies. The most literate culture of the Mediterranean world was also dance-mad; the power of dance was both venerated and feared; the status of dancers rose and fell depending on who

danced and who watched; and the debate over the proper relationship between the word and the body was never-ending. As with so many other things Greek, the Romans took over both sides of this debate.

Except for choral processions and martial exercises, the early Romans were apparently not partial to dancing. Later, under Greek influence, Roman patricians sent their sons and daughters to dancing schools to learn graceful movements. Around 150 B.C. the guardians of public morality ordered these schools closed before their influence could weaken the fiber of Roman youth, but the ban (like so many others before and since) was unsuccessful. Dance (by non-Roman slaves) was also a feature of the public games that became an obsession wherever Rome ruled. The stern republican Cicero (106–43 B.C.) held that real men do not dance—unless they are drunk or insane.

Shortly after Cicero's death a form of theatrical dance known as pantomime became wildly popular in Rome. Contemporary writers praised the ability of the pantomimists to convey the most complex narratives through gestures alone. Exactly how the pantomimists achieved their effects has been lost to history, but as the performances grew bawdier, they were roundly condemned by moralists—which of course did nothing to diminish their popularity. As for other uses of body

language in imperial Rome, we have the testimony of Lucian (A.D. 120–180), who reminded his readers that dancing is as old as love. Throughout the Roman era the association of dance with love, with lust (both personal and professional) and with violence (the public games) was proverbial, as the New Testament story of Salome and John the Baptist makes clear (Matthew 14:6–8). So too was the link between dance and the mystery religions that flourished throughout the empire; according to Lucian, there was not a single mystery religion that did not include some kind of dance in its initiation ceremonies.

Early Christianity offered itself as a fulfillment of the Word that had been revealed to the Hebrews and as a cleansing of the moral filth that had polluted Roman society. Given this mission, and the desire to distinguish itself from other mystery religions, it was not easy for early Christians to accommodate the dancing body in their worship. Indeed, despite the fact that incarnation was the medium of Christ's message, Christianity from the start manifested a love-hate relationship to the body.

The earliest followers of Christ, looking toward an imminent Second Coming, were concerned with living a pure life that required the denial of bodily desires. Their goal was not to sanctify the body but to transcend it. Celibacy was the ideal held out to them by Paul—who nevertheless conceded that for



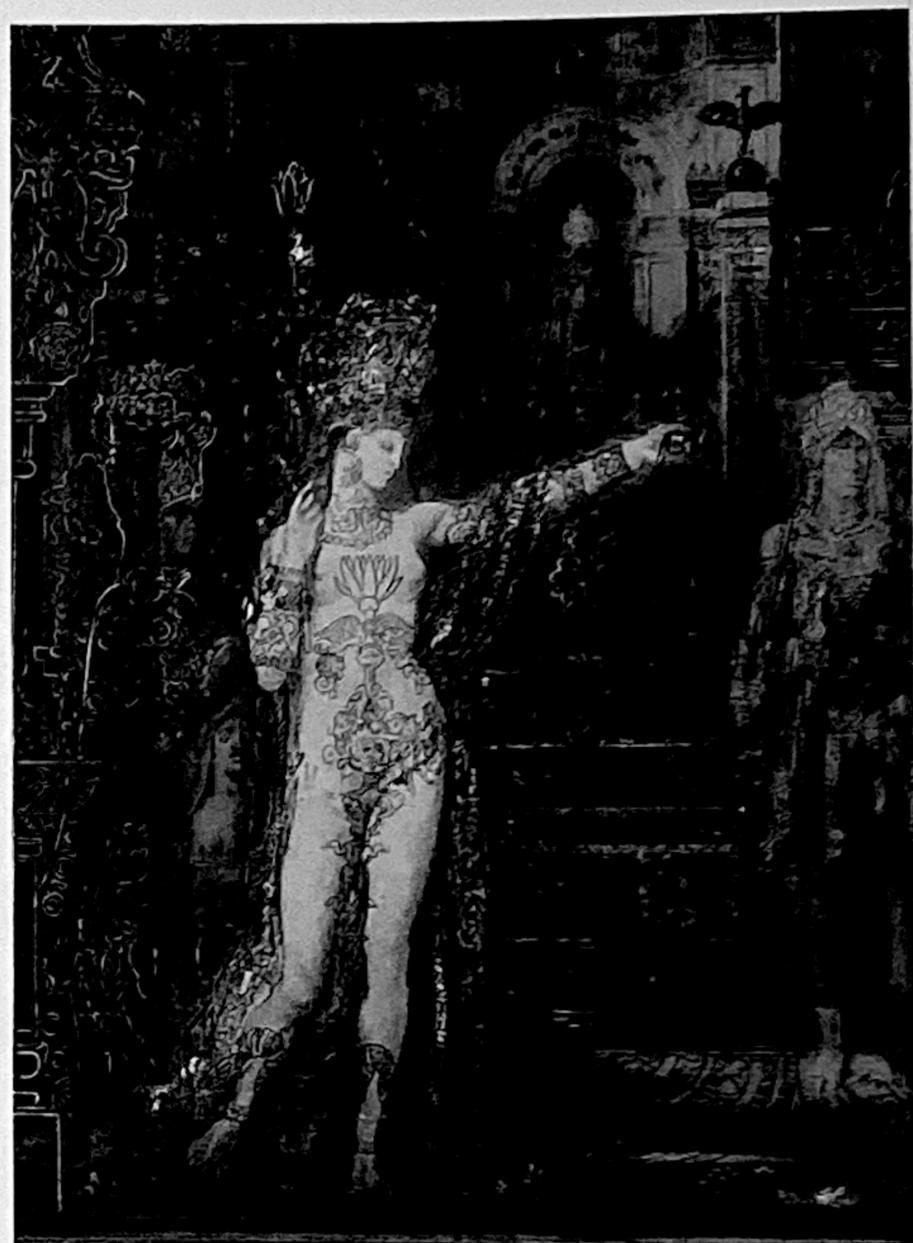
those who could not abstain from sex, “let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn” (I Corinthians 7:9). The debate among early Christians about the place of the dancing body in worship was fueled by references to the Scriptures and to the writings of the Neo-Platonists, a school of philosophers who held that the world of time, space, and flesh was inferior to the transcendent realms of intellect and spirit. The early church fathers, believing that the body was inferior to the spirit, were drawn to the Neo-Platonic concept of an “ideal” body free of unseemly lusts. This was the kind of body that, properly purified and controlled, could perform sacred dances to the greater glory of God.

Like the ancient Hebrews, the Christians of the first three centuries after Christ were surrounded by examples of pagan dance that they abhorred; and they could cite any number of scriptural verses disapproving of dances—from the Golden Calf to Salome—performed in

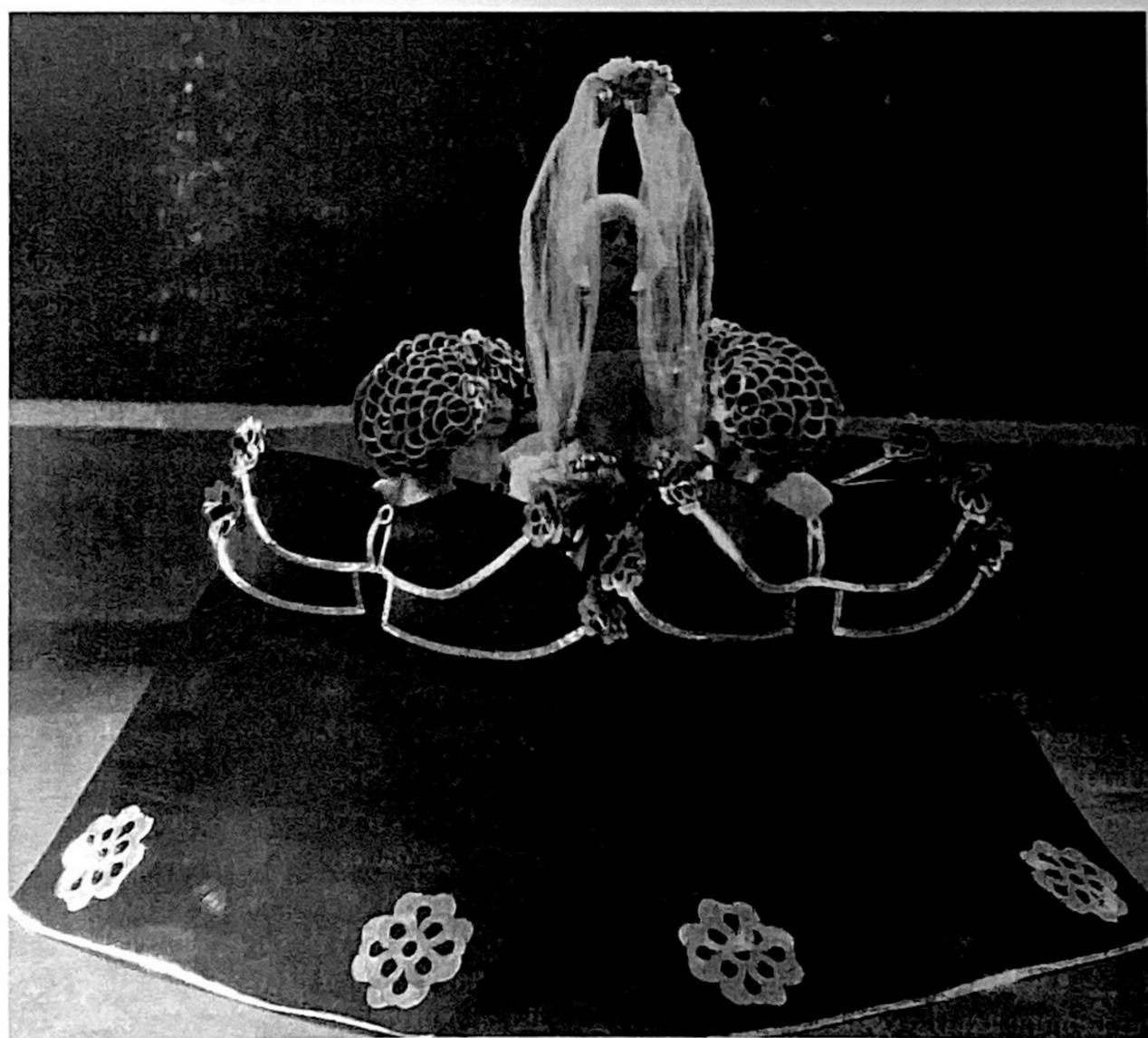
the wrong way, at the wrong time, and for the wrong purpose. But they could not ignore the dances of David and Miriam or the approving references to dance in the Psalms and the Book of Ezekiel (6:11). In their own scriptures, Paul admonished them to “glorify God in your body” which is “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 6:19–20); and both Matthew (11:17) and Luke (7:32) quoted Jesus as saying, “We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced.” At the same time, there were more and more converts to Christianity from sects where dancing was central to worship; rather than expect these converts to stop dancing the moment they were baptized, the church fathers found ways to “baptize” dance by refining and spiritualizing it, just as they had found ways to give a Christian interpretation to pre-Christian myths and symbols.

The dances that won the approval of the church fathers were group dances, typically processions or circles in which

Etruscan painting portrayed dance in a freer and livelier manner than any surviving images from Greek or Roman art. These dancers and musicians from the Tomb of the Triclinium in the necropolis of the Monterozzi, Tarquinia, Italy, 480–470 B.C., are part of a larger scene of a banquet. Whether the feasting and revelry refer to the life of the deceased or the life he could expect after death is not known.



The story of Salome, with its overtones of sadism and depravity, was especially spellbinding to audiences of the fin de siècle. In art, the symbol of the sexually demonic woman began to appear about thirty years before the end of the century, as in French painter Gustave Moreau's *Salome Dancing Before Herod* (1874–86; above right). Interest in the story gathered momentum with Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, which was banned in England, but produced in Paris by Sarah Bernhardt in 1894. English artist Aubrey Beardsley produced a well-known series of illustrations based on the play, and Richard Strauss his startling opera of 1905. *Salome* was soon embraced as a popular subject by movie makers and modern dancers. Maud Allen (above left), an American dancer of the turn of the century, was among the latter. Silent film star Theda Bara made a *Salome* in 1918, but more amusing by far was the *Salomé* of 1923, based on Beardsley's drawings as adapted by Rudolf Valentino's wife, Natacha Rambova. Nazimova (right) played the title role.



men, separated from women, performed solemn, decorous movements in "the fear of God." While shunning the ecstatic, lascivious dances of the pagans, Christians could dance as a congregation during ritual prayer; dance could also abet mystical practice, further spiritual healing and cleansing, and explicate scripture and doctrine through symbolic enactments such as the "dance of the blessed" and "the dance of the angels." The circle, or ring, dance in particular was seen as an earthly counterpart of the heavenly dance of the angels, which was itself a celebration of the Resurrection. The dancers sang hymns and psalms, clapped their hands rhythmically, hopped and stamped their feet. Participation by women in sacred dance was always suspect because of the temptation it posed to men. Basileios the Great (344–407), bishop of Caesarea, wrote: "Could there be anything more blessed than to imitate on earth the ring dance of the angels?" But in a sermon condemning a drunken Easter celebration, he railed against women who "dance with lustful eyes and loud laughter; as if seized by a kind of frenzy [to] excite the lust of the youths. . . . You [women] move your feet and hop about madly and you dance the ring dance, which you should not do, for you should more properly bend the knees in prayer."

The tendency of dancers to go beyond the bounds of propriety, even on consecrated ground, led some authorities to harden their opinion against dance itself. One of the most influential of these authorities was Augustine (354–430). As a self-proclaimed expert on temptation (he confessed to having

taken pleasure in the Roman games as a young man), Augustine denounced all wild, abandoned dancing, even when accompanied by psalm-singing. Unable to condemn all dance (since it was clearly sanctioned by scripture), he damned it with the faintest possible endorsement: "Let him who dances, dance." Augustine went on to suggest that the dance of Christians may be purified of all fleshly taint by following the example of St. Cyprian the Martyr: "He heard the song, he revealed himself dancing, not in the body, but in the spirit." Augustine would no doubt have approved of the discreet dancing depicted in Byzantine church mosaics from the fifth through the eighth centuries. Angels float in the sky, holding hands and apparently moving in a circle to heavenly music; their long robes cover their legs so that their feet are invisible. (This motif remained popular through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, as can be seen in Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* of c. 1500. When the feet of the angels and the blessed entering heaven are visible, they are shown dangling down without support, as if to emphasize the ethereal, incorporeal nature of this dance.)

Condemnation of the wrong kinds of dancing became a function of the church councils that met periodically to instruct the faithful in doctrine and practice. It was not dance alone that worried the hierarchy; from the sixth century on, proclamations against shameless dancing in churches, churchyards, and at sacred festivals were accompanied by denunciations of unseemly art and excessively embellished music. But the status of dance in

the churches of Western Europe was always less secure than that of art and music. The issue was control. Christian worship was a communal function whose goal was salvation. The hierarchy wanted to be sure that nothing heard or seen on consecrated ground would distract the congregation; and art and music were inherently more controllable than dance. Commissioned paintings, statues, mosaics, and windows could be rejected if deemed unsuitable; once installed, they could be removed or covered over if the hierarchy changed its mind. Singers in a choir had to follow a score, whether written or not. But the dancing body was unpredictable, suspect in its individuality, notoriously prey to temptation and corruption; wild dancing, seen as a vestige of "pagan customs," was explicitly associated with the Devil as early as the fourth century.

The fact that church councils kept condemning the wrong kind of dancing for more than a thousand years indicates how prevalent the prohibited practices were. Bans on dancing were most frequent between 1200 and 1500—a period in which Western Christian churches were by no means inhospitable to carefully controlled liturgical dance. On church floors in France, Italy, England, and Germany large labyrinths were laid out in multicolored stones; the one in Chartres Cathedral measures forty feet in diameter. The precise nature of the dances or dancelike processions performed on these labyrinths is a matter of conjecture; congregants probably followed a leader in tracing out a winding path that symbolized a mystical journey through Satan's realm and, at the conclusion of the ceremony, the



The labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, located in the center of the nave, is made up of 365 black and white stones. It can just barely be seen as a polished area in the floor of the nave in the unobstructed photograph (below) of the interior of the cathedral. If you trace the route through the maze (left), you will see that the clever design would have taken the line of dancers down every possible avenue before delivering them to Jerusalem, in the center.

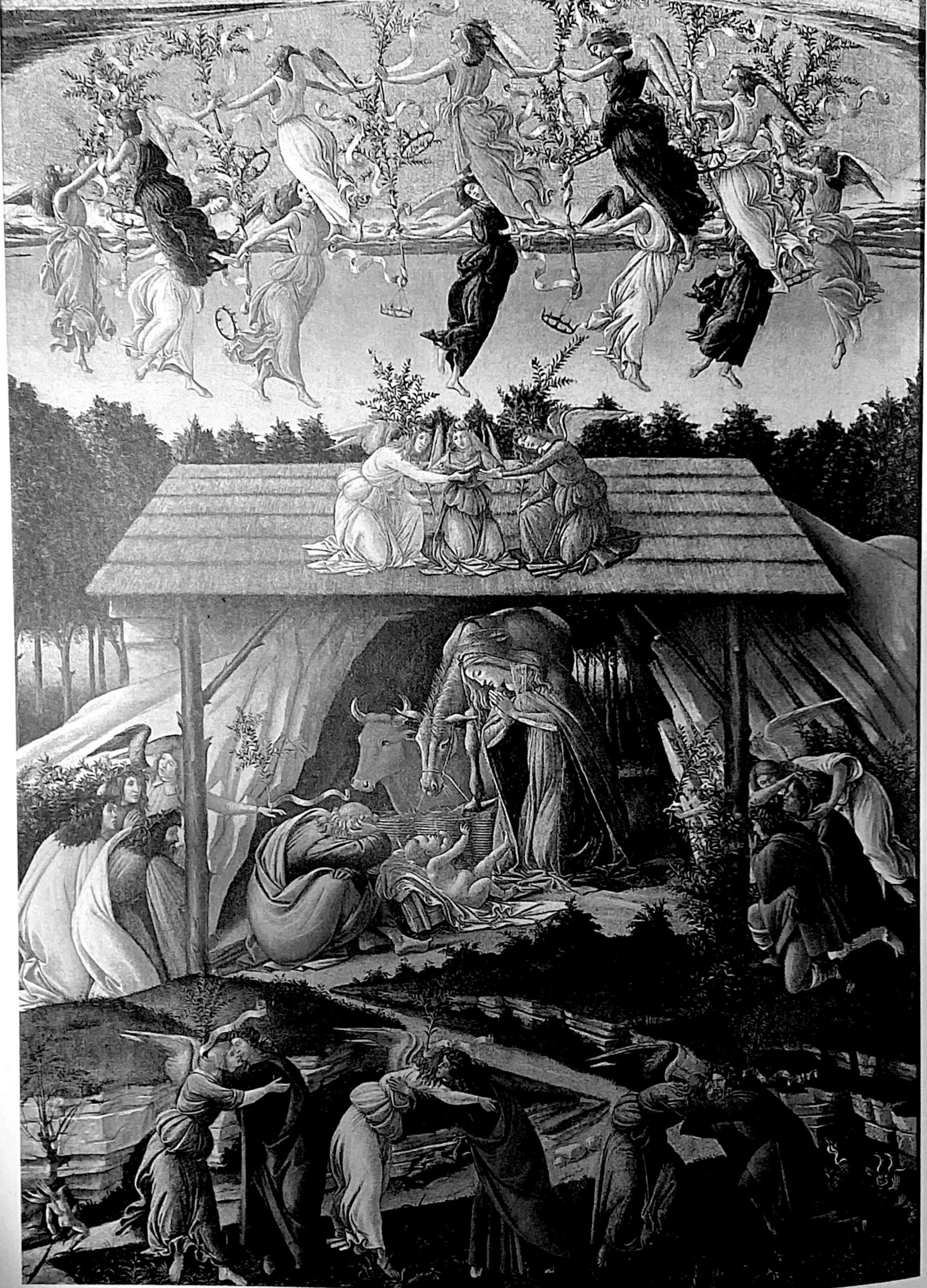
triumphant arrival in Jerusalem or heaven. One variant, the pelota, or ball dance, is well-known from church records dating back to the fourteenth century; the pelota was performed in the cathedral of Auxerre, a city in central France, as late as 1538. On Easter Sunday the dean of the cathedral led his canons, linked hand to hand, in a dance around the labyrinth in the nave while all sang the Easter hymn; under one arm the dean held a large ball which he threw back and forth to one or more of the dancers. In some variations, the dance itself was a hopping three-step—three steps forward, one step back.

Besides these labyrinth dances, other kinds of liturgical dancing familiar to Christian congregations during the later Middle Ages included the prescribed movements of the priest around the altar, the mystery and morality plays staged on the porches of cathedrals, and the carefully choreographed processions of choristers. In fifteenth-century Seville, six young boys dressed as angels with gilded wings danced before the high altar while accompanying themselves on castanets. Despite opposition from those who questioned its propriety, this “children’s dance” received the approval of two popes. It can still be seen today; the choristers, who now number ten, dance in the costumes of Renaissance pages.

The unrelenting efforts of medieval church officials to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable dance had important consequences for European society at large. Put simply, if unacceptable dance—the wilder “Dionysian” dance that offers release from the constraints of daily life and that is often



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The many great public squares in European cities, like the Piazza San Marco in Venice (below), were well suited to carefully choreographed religious pageantry. In Gentile Bellini's *Procession of the Reliquary of the True Cross in the Piazza San Marco* (1496), the procession is emerging from between the church of San Marco and the Doge's Palace in the upper right. It curves around to the front of the picture, where we can see the reliquary being carried under a canopy. To the upper left, people from the head of the procession are beginning to take their places for a formal ceremony.

Opposite: Sandro Botticelli's *Mystical Nativity* (c. 1500), a painting of richly symbolic if obscure imagery, depicts a circle of angels dancing above the Holy Family in the manger.

associated with trance and possession—was excluded from the church, where was it supposed to go? The medieval church claimed jurisdiction over virtually everything a person did, from waking to sleeping, from work to play, from birth to death. Nevertheless, there were areas where vigilance was sporadic and largely ineffectual. This came about because Christians tended to separate human activity into two realms—the sacred and the secular. This sharp dichotomy, which goes back to Christianity's origin in a world dominated by a hostile imperial power, is inherent in such statements as "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). In terms of doctrine, a clear line was drawn

between the life of the spirit to which men should aspire and the material world (including the body) from which men should try to free themselves. As a practical matter, this split opened the way for secular forms of dance that would not have been allowed in the sacred precincts of the church.

Many of the traditional dances of the European countryside were originally associated with pre-Christian festivals that marked the changing seasons or the worship of local deities. These dances were often energetic, involving lots of whirling and stamping; men and women danced in sight of each other and even with each other. Rather than forbid them outright, church officials baptized the old festivals with new names honoring events in the Christian calendar.

Under this dispensation the traditional dances not only retained much of their pre-Christian flavor but were relatively free to evolve in new directions beyond the purview of the hierarchy. In time, this contributed to the creation of a purely secular dance tradition in Western Europe.

Another kind of dancing that tested the limits of church control was dancing during Carnival—the days of public merrymaking just before the penitential season of Lent. Some scholars trace the origin of Carnival to the ancient Roman New Year festival of Saturnalia, when masters and slaves briefly swapped roles and disorder reigned in the streets; or even further back to the Greek revels of Dionysus that celebrated the earth's fertility. Whatever its roots, dancing at





Carnival was wild and abandoned. Church officials condemned it as early as the seventh century. Isidore, bishop of Seville, who lived from 560 to 636, recorded this description: “[The revelers] assumed monstrous forms and transformed themselves into wild shapes; others womanized their masculine faces and made female gestures—all romping and stamping in their dances and clapping their hands and, what is still more shameful, both sexes danced together in the ring dance. . . .” Authorities in Spain were issuing proclamations against such behavior well into the sixteenth century. Similar customs, including blasphemous parodies of the divine service within the church itself, persisted throughout Europe, despite repeated bans.

Clearly, the approval of certain forms

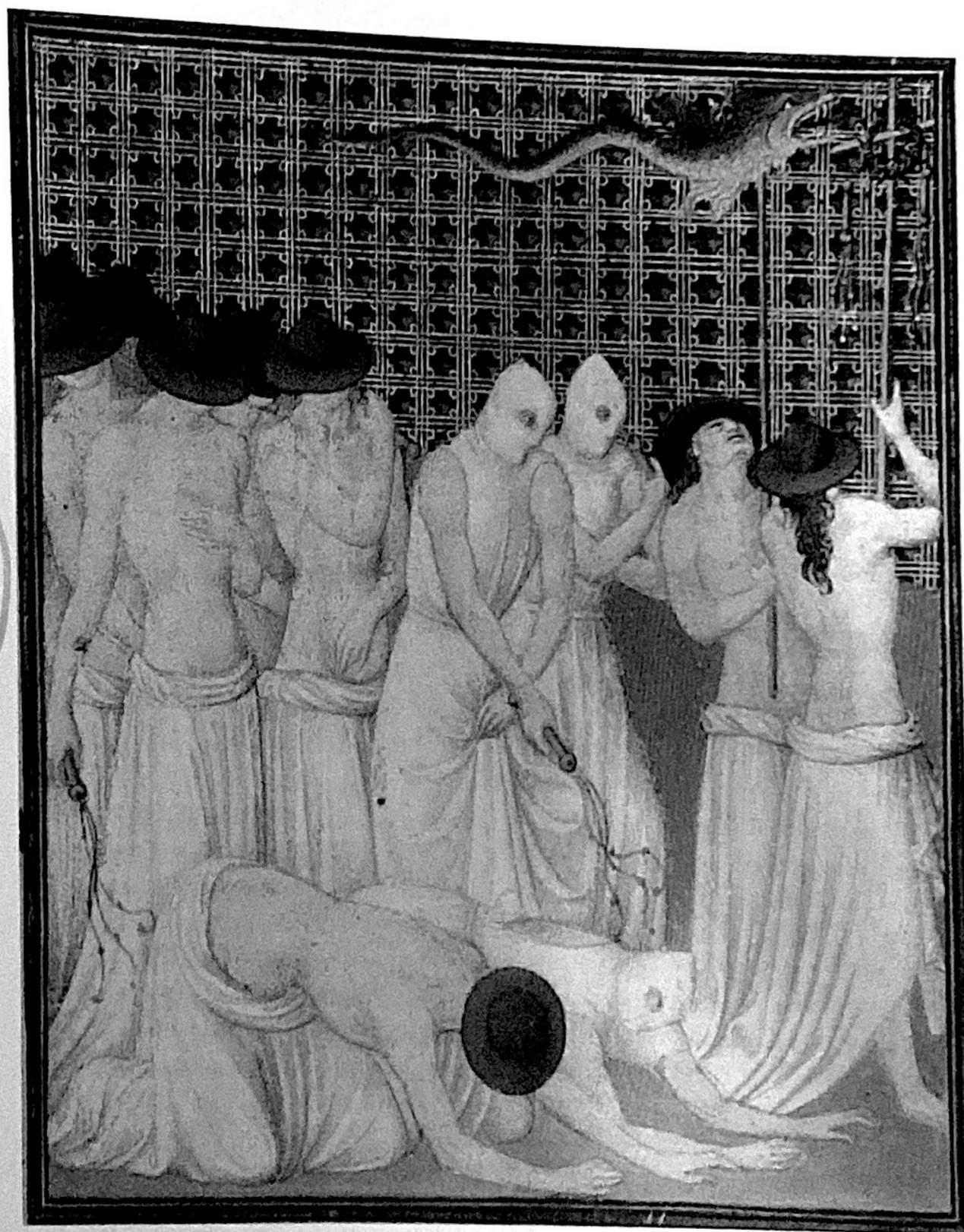
of dance, both in and out of the church, did not mean that medieval Christianity had resolved its ambivalence toward the body. Denial of the body through mortification (such as hair shirts and penitential whipping) was enthusiastically sanctioned; sensuality was denounced. But the impulse to dance can take many forms. In the wake of the Black Death that ravaged Europe between 1348 and 1351, killing more than a third of the population, processions of flagellants appeared on the Continent and in England; barefoot and dressed as pilgrims, they publicly lashed themselves with leather and rope scourges in an effort to prevail upon Christ and Mary to end the plague. The penitential whipping was carried out as they moved in a circle dance, singing hymns. Both civil and church authorities acted swift-

Pieter Bruegel's Battle Between Carnival and Lent (1559) is an allegory of the abrupt change in mood from the exuberant Carnival to the austere Lent. The overindulgent fools of Carnival are championed by a fat man riding a wine barrel and wielding a spit with a roasting boar on it. His rival leading a Lenten army of the well-intentioned is an old hag whose weapon is a shovel bearing two modest herrings. In the far distance, on the Carnival side of the painting, is a circle of dancing figures.

ly to suppress the flagellants, whose fervor was seen as threatening to the public order.

History assures us that, no matter what the circumstances, people will dance. During the period when mortification of the body was most widely practiced in Europe, outbreaks of what was called "dance mania" reached epidemic proportions. In the late summer and fall of 1374, unruly crowds of men and women, from all classes of society, appeared in Aachen, Cologne, and other cities along the Rhine; holding hands and "dancing" in a crazed manner, they leaped high in the air and jerked their bodies about in terrible spasms, at times shouting incomprehensible syllables and foaming at the mouth. From their behavior it was clear to bystanders that these half-naked "choreomaniacs," as they were called, were possessed by demons, whose names they sometimes cried out in their agony. Often they "danced" before the relics of saints that were known for their ability to exorcise demons that caused physical pain.

Medical historians, sifting through accounts in contemporary chronicles, believe that many of the choreomaniacs were suffering from convulsive ergotism, a condition they could have contracted by eating bread made from rye flour contaminated by the ergot fungus. Ergot is a potent poison that can produce violent and painful cramps; among the symptoms of ergot poisoning are severe muscle spasms and twitching. By the beginning of the seventeenth century such symptoms were widely recognized as having natural causes. But in the late Middle Ages both sufferers and onlookers immediately associated the malady

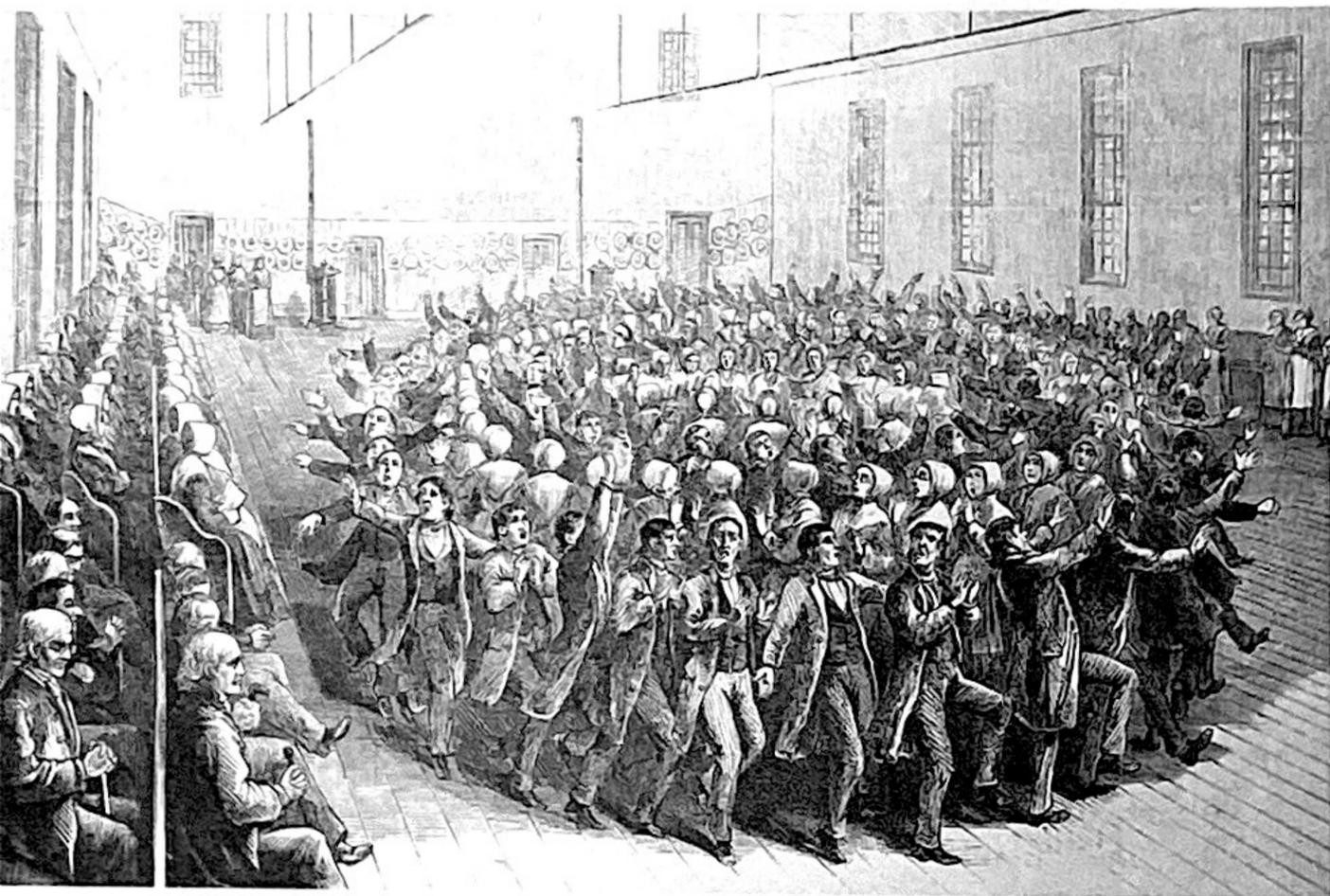


In the wake of the Black Death that ravaged Europe between 1348 and 1351, killing more than a third of the population, processions of penitential flagellants, such as these from an illumination in the Belles Heures of Jean, duke of Berry, painted by Pol, Jean, and Herman de Limbourg in c. 1410–1413, appeared on the Continent and in England.

A Jewish congregation celebrates Simhat Torah (right), which marks the completion of the annual cycle of Torah reading, with joyful dancing outside a synagogue in the village of Dubrovna, Belorussia, before World War I.



The Shakers (below), a religious group that settled in the United States in the eighteenth century, lived as celibates in strictly segregated men's and women's dormitories, but danced together in intricate formations as a form of worship, as seen in this vigorous circle dance in a Shaker meetinghouse, New Lebanon, New York, 1873.



with dancing and possession by malign spirits. This confirms, if further proof were needed, that medieval Europe knew, and feared, the role that the dancing body could play in making contact with a supernatural realm.

The long-standing debate about the propriety of dance in Christian worship was resolved by the Reformation and the ensuing Counter Reformation. Protestant reformers, in their zeal to rid the church of everything that distracted worshippers from concentration on the Word of God, banished all displays of wealth and pomp; poetry and music were permitted, beautiful images and liturgical dance were not. The Roman Catholic hierarchy, with some reluctance and with some notable exceptions (as in Seville), responded in kind. Carnival excesses were brought under

firmer control, and most dances inside churches were halted. The labyrinth in Auxerre Cathedral was torn up in 1690.

In his 1685 tract against *Mixt or Promiscuous Dancing*, the New England Puritan divine Increase Mather admitted that "sober and grave Dancing of Men with Men, or of Women with Women" was permissible "in due season, and with moderation." But as for wanton dancing of any kind, and especially "Gynecandrical Dancing," Mather had no doubt that this was literally the invention of the Devil.

In Europe, the almost complete excising of dance from Christian worship only reinforced the growing importance of dance in secular life. This was true among all social classes. The dances of the countryside had their counterparts in the dances of the nobility, which,

under the influence of Renaissance humanism, evolved into increasingly elaborate court entertainments and courtship rituals. While court and country dances differed in style, there was a constant interchange between them; and both developed along lines that would have been impossible within the church proper—men and women were not only dancing in each other's presence but together, physically linked, as couples.

No one thought to record the exact date and place, but it may have been in twelfth-century Provence—home of the troubadours and the birthplace of courtly love—that Western-style couple dancing began. At its origin the new style of dancing probably looked nothing like the intimacy seen on later dance floors. A man and a woman might break from the formation of a line or circle dance or from the stately procession of a court entertainment, and execute a few steps in unison with perhaps a brief touching of the hands to help coordinate their movements, before rejoining the formation, to be followed by another couple and then another. This public dancing in couples was not only unprecedented in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it was something that would have been frowned on in many parts of the world as a violation of public decorum; inevitably, there were unsuccessful attempts throughout Western Europe to ban couple dancing.

Here and there, Protestant visionaries like the Shakers (who originated in England and migrated to the United States in the eighteenth century) placed dance at the center of their worship. Independently, the Hasidic movement

that arose in Eastern European Judaism in the eighteenth century sought a more personal form of worship through ecstatic dancing in the synagogue, either in groups or in solo improvisations (with men and women always strictly segregated). But these were exceptions. From the Renaissance on, dance in Judeo-Christian societies typically expressed secular rather than religious concerns. Which is not to say that the West's long history of ambivalence about the dancing body left no mark on the aesthetics of Western dance. As we will see in later chapters, the ballerinas of the nineteenth century who danced on their toes were seen as ethereal creatures, symbols of a longing to rise above the earth, to aspire toward a purer realm, to seek an ideal beauty that transcends the flesh. In popular lithographs of the period, barefoot ballerinas are depicted hovering in the air, dressed in gauzy white—secular angels beckoning the onlooker not to the glories of Heaven, but to the ineffable pleasures of Art.

Among the Yoruba of west Africa, dance is typically grounded, with movement directed not upward but down toward the life-sustaining earth. This does not mean that Yoruba dance is in any way separated from the realm of the spirits. Indeed, nothing resembling the Western split between sacred and secular exists in Yorubaland. Yoruba cosmology recognizes two closely related realms of existence: the tangible world of the living and the invisible realm of gods, ancestors, and other spirit-beings. Despite their differences, these two realms are closely linked be-

cause both partake of the life force that runs through the universe. The ultimate source of life is the divine creator, an indefinable figure neither male nor female, who mostly stands aloof from the created universe. Human interaction is with the potent (but far from omnipotent) gods and ancestors; the dancing body is the place where the two realms meet.

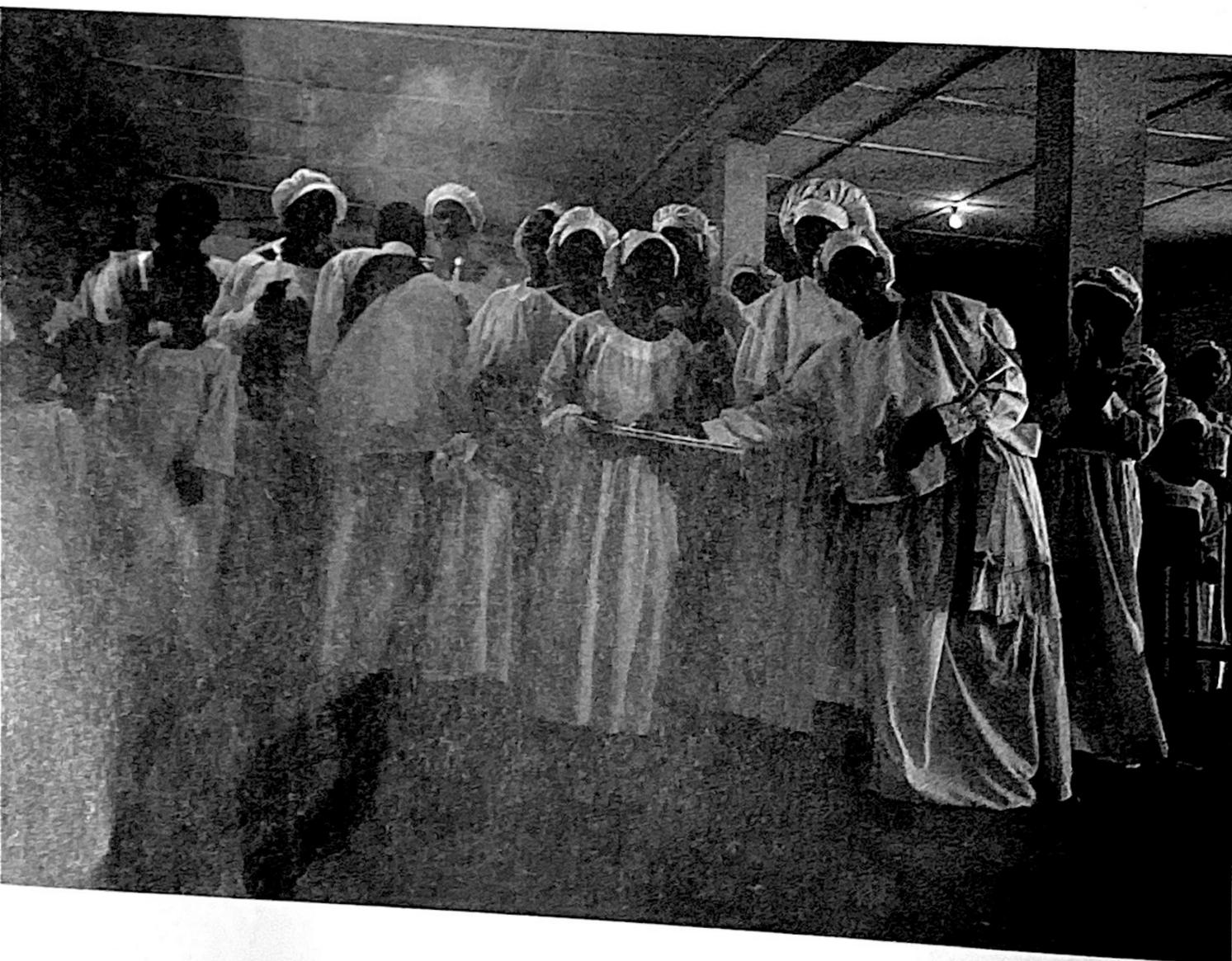
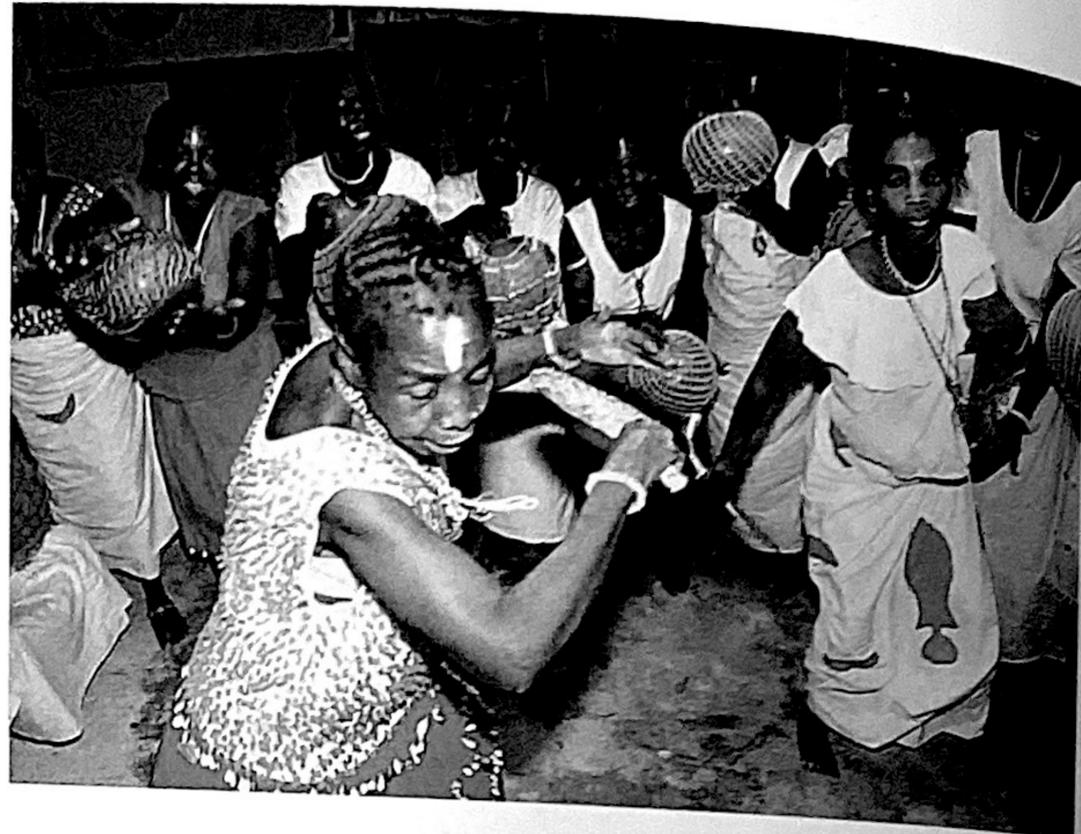
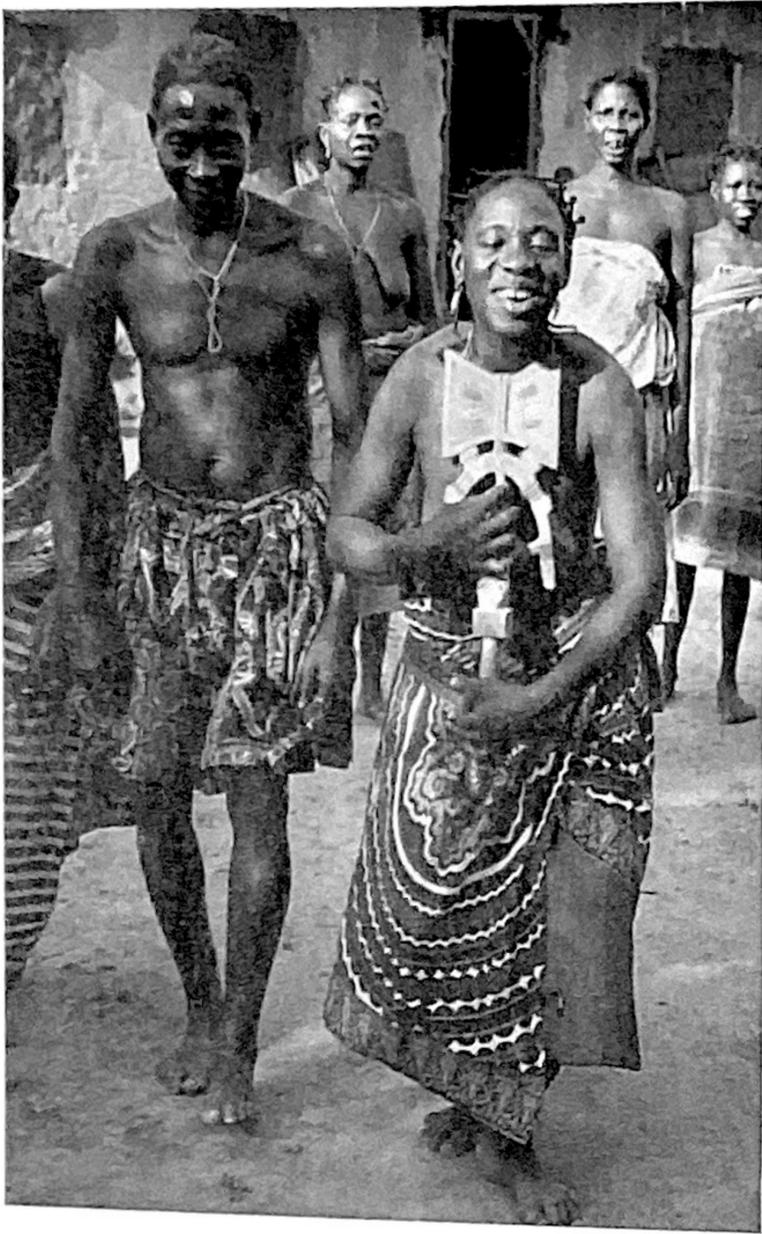
In Yorubaland worshipers communicate with gods and ancestors through both words and dance. Some ceremonies are designed to induce possession. These are communal gatherings that involve drumming, dancing, and the chanting of praise songs, called oriki, which are addressed to specific deities. When properly invoked, the gods enter the human community by possessing certain priests and priestesses who have been initiated into their service. The moment of possession may be signified by a sudden change in the movements of the initiate or by a loud guttural cry.

In the Yoruba pantheon there are more than four hundred gods, or orishas, representing deified ancestors or personified natural forces. Orishas fall into two broad categories: "cool," basically predictable beings like Osun, a river goddess; and "hot," typically capricious gods like Sango, a former king who wields the dangerous lightning bolt. According to Chief Bayo Ogundijo of the Institute of Cultural Studies at Ile Ife in Nigeria, all the orishas were "people who lived on the earth once" and made a strong impression on their contemporaries; after they "disappeared," the people "proclaimed them deities." A devotee may follow a particular deity or several deities. At shrines where their images

are kept, orishas are praised with oriki and fed with bits of food and water; worshipers will also offer sacrifices on the advice of specialists in divination, and dance for, and with, the orishas at the large seasonal festivals held in their honor.

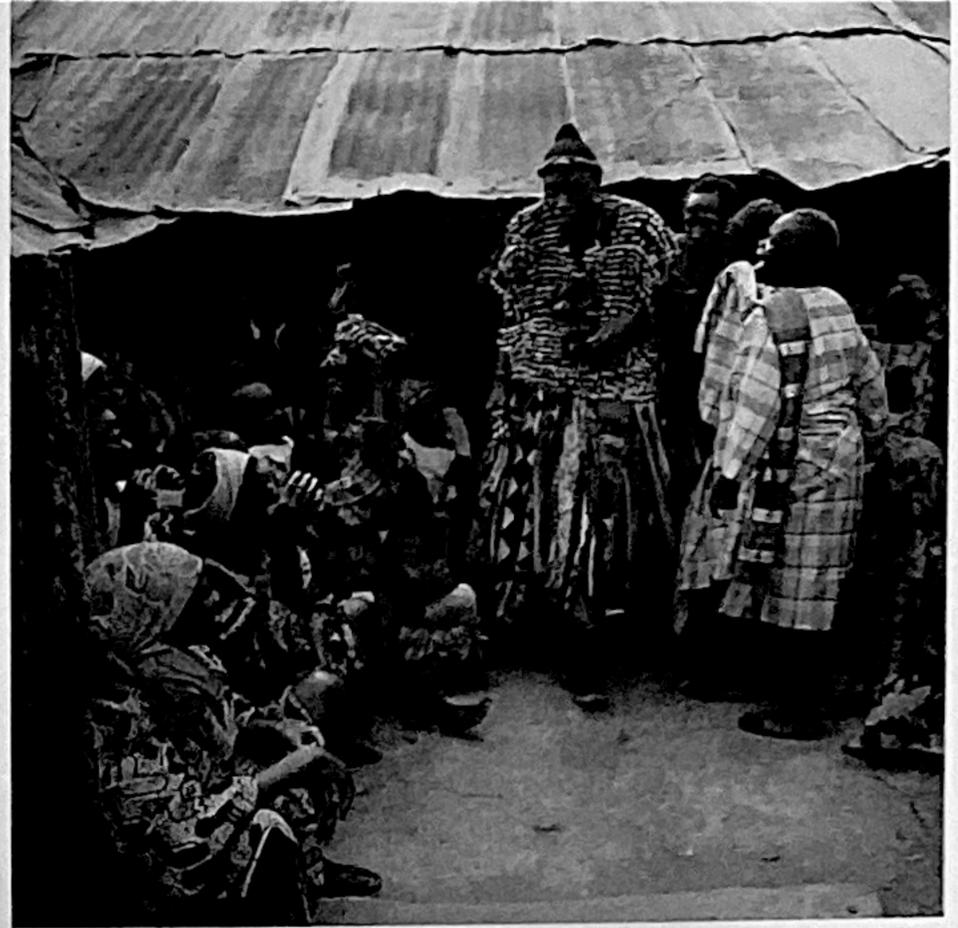
A particular locality might have ten festivals a year, each lasting a week or more. The relationship between deity and devotee is thought of as reciprocal; in return for devotion, an orisha will protect the devotee, drive away disease, ensure healthy children, and the like. Deities that are not regularly fed and honored by devotees are said to "die." In the words of a Yoruba proverb: "Without human beings there would be no gods."

Like other orishas, the thunder god Sango loves dancing. His worship was originally associated with the Oyo Empire which dominated what is now southwestern Nigeria in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Today he is widely venerated throughout Yorubaland and in the Americas where the descendants of west Africans practice variants of their ancestral religion. Sango's enduring popularity may have something to do with his tragic and all-too-human entanglement with the levers of ambition during his time on earth. As a king of Oyo he was a great warrior but so headstrong that his own people dethroned him. According to one legend, he dabbled in magic that he did not fully understand, triggering bolts of lightning that killed all his children and all his wives but one. In remorse he hung himself, but his followers had him deified, as a thunder god, in an attempt to placate the awesome power of nature that he had become identified with.



A Yoruban Sango priestess (top left) dances with her dance-wand, Ogori, Nigeria. As she chants an oriki, or praise song, she gesticulates with the dance-wand. The worship of Sango has spread beyond the Yoruba-speaking peoples of west Africa to other groups in the region: In a Sango temple in Benin City (above), worshiped by Edo-speaking peoples, a possession ceremony is in progress. The priestess on the left is in a trance. Behind the dancers, women are shaking calabashes strung with beads. Left, worshipers at a Sunday service at the Celestial Church of Christ, an aladura church in Gbongan, Nigeria, 1991.

An egungun dancer (below) in the marketplace, Gbongan, Nigeria, 1991. When the dancer spins fast enough, the outer strips of cloth lift to reveal a different design, of a contrasting color, underneath; with some masks, the costume reverses entirely, presenting an entirely different appearance at the end of the dance. Right, Sango possession priest Sangodele Ibuowo, Oyo, Nigeria, 1991.





Sango the family-destroyer is now worshiped as giver and protector of children, the scourge of adulterers. His followers chant poetic verses reminiscent of the Book of Job:

The dog stays in the house of its master
But does not know his intentions.
The sheep does not know the intentions
Of the man who feeds it.
We ourselves follow Sango
Although we do not know his intentions.
It is not easy to live in Sango's company.

The priests and priestesses of Sango carry beautifully carved wooden "dance-wands" that depict images not of the unknowable god but of his rapt followers. Dressed in robe, shirt, shorts, and baggy trousers, the Sango priest sings the god's praises and moves rhythmically to the "hot" drumming that Sango is known to like. As the moment of possession approaches, the priest dramatically strips off his outer garments

and bares his upper body to the deity; his steps become irregular; rising on the balls of his feet he slowly twists his torso from the waist up. When the god "mounts" him, the priest cries out and his movements change suddenly to reflect the nature of Sango himself: energetic, abrupt, angular. Omofolabo Ajaji, who teaches at the University of Kansas, has compared the dance of Sango to "an inferno, a whirlwind, dizzy and confused, virile, full of body contortions, restless gestures, diagonal leg flicks and jerky shoulder movements."

By contrast, the dance of Osun, a deity who cures the sick and blesses her followers with children, is sinuous and flowing, like the river she is associated with. Her priestesses wear white robes hung with colorfully beaded "dance panels" and carry on their heads brass bowls filled with medicinal waters and herbs; their shoulders are bared to the deity. They take short steps, close to the ground; their body movements are fluid;

their extended arms make graceful circular motions from the shoulders as their hands revolve at the wrist. Their dance does not change radically when they are possessed, but their bodies may shake briefly, and a moment of rigidity may interrupt the smooth flow of their dance.

In addition to possession ceremonies, Yoruba communities come together periodically to take part in a kind of dance drama called *egungun*. During *egungun* festivals, family ancestors are honored by maskers who don elaborate costumes that cover them from head to toe. Once concealed beneath these full-body masks, they are treated as if they were the ancestors come back to life. Accompanied by crowds chanting *oriki*, the *egungun* move through the community, animating their masks with distinctive steps and gestures that express the ancestors' personalities: fierce and aggressive for famous warriors, gentle and graceful for the matriarch of a lineage.

In addition to masks honoring ancestors, there are egungun animal masquerades — such as the one opposite at an egungun festival in Imasi, Nigeria, 1978 — and satirical masquerades, which depict human stereotypes. An example of the latter is the couple at right, in Ilogbo, Nigeria, 1982, who are poking fun at visiting tourists. She clutches a purse while he holds a ballpoint pen. Writing, not dancing, is the chosen form of expression of the white man.



Colorful and imposing in themselves, the egungun masks only reveal their full power when they are “danced.”

In egungun festivals, as in Yoruba ceremonies of possession, the body serves as a conduit to the realm of the spirits. But the role it plays in each event is quite different. Where the initiate of an orisha openly offers his or her body to the god, the egungun masker conceals all evidence of his identity. Most egungun masks are huge, enveloping, sacklike, many-layered; the face is usually hidden behind tight mesh netting. The more elaborate costumes are topped by carved headpieces that combine animal and human features. The masks are the property of prominent families or secret societies; ownership of an egungun mask is a mark of status in the community. Each year new decorations and new layers are added; the outer layers typically consist of long strips of cloth attached only at the top so that they flutter with each step of the dancer and fly out in all directions when he suddenly changes direction or whirls around. Some costumes are designed to turn completely inside out when the masker goes into a sustained spin. The honored ancestors are mostly male; the maskers who animate the costumes are invariably male. Women are kept away from the sacred groves and cult houses where the masks are prepared. Yet it is principally women who chant the praise-songs that, along with the drums, rouse the egungun to action.

Egungun masquerades make tangible the presence of the past in the life of a community. Accordingly, they vary from locality to locality and from performance to performance. Even when

the people of the community know who is under the mask (as they often do), they greet the mask as the ancestor incarnate, in a willing suspension of disbelief that is essential to the success of the masquerade. In the words of Chief Bayo Ogundijo: “What would happen if my father who died many years ago reappeared in our house exactly as I knew him before he died? I would not have the courage to meet with him, no matter how deeply I felt about him. That is why it is good to meet with one’s old, old father covering himself with cloths. It is just as a disguise, so that people may not be gripped with fear.” Occasionally, under the influence of the drumming and the chanted oriki and the dancing, a masker may become possessed by the spirit of the ancestor, but this is not necessary to the purpose of the masquerade.

In the western Yoruba town of Abeokuta, once an important military outpost, an egungun festival recalls the anarchic years following the fall of the Oyo Empire. When the powerful warrior masks take to the streets, they are accompanied by crowds of young men who enact a kind of mock battle that calls attention to the carnage and disruptions of past wars. People scatter to get out of the way of the more fearsome masks, who flail about in violent pantomime; later these same egungun will utter incantations and bless their followers in guttural, unearthly voices. Although such festivals can be thought of as dance drama, there are no “spectators” in the Western sense of “theatergoer.” In egungun, as in the ceremonies where specific orishas are invited to possess the initiated, everyone present is a

participant without whose collaboration the transforming potential of the event cannot be realized.

Worship that uses both words and body to communicate with the deity is a strong tradition among the Yoruba. This tradition can be seen at work among Nigerian Christians who practice a form of ecstatic worship in what are called *aladura churches*. (*Aladura* means “the ones who pray.”) These churches, which are found not only in west Africa but throughout the Yoruba diaspora, represent a creative synthesis between the teachings of English Protestant missionaries, who were active in west Africa from the middle of the nineteenth century, and Yoruba religious practices. With the singing of hymns and dancing in the pews and the aisles and before the altar, white-robed worshipers invite possession by the Holy Spirit. Those possessed are specially trained members of the congregation. When the Spirit descends on them, they begin speaking “in tongues”—mysterious vocalizations that are not of this world but that can be decoded and put to use for the benefit of the worshipers. Prophetess Rachel Ajoke Ale of the Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim Church, Proclaimer of Jesus Christ the Source of Peace, in Gbongan, Nigeria, describes the efficacy of the congregation’s worship services: “Through me, God has performed many wonderful things since I became a Prophetess. Barren women come to us for God’s blessing and when we pray for them, God answers. People who are sick when we pray for them, God delivers them from sickness; the lame walk through us; delayed pregnancies are delivered by God’s power.”



Shiva, the great Hindu deity of creation and destruction, is represented as Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, in this twelfth-century bronze icon from southern India.

In India as in sub-Saharan Africa, the dancing body occupies a place of honor in religious worship. While the Yoruba world view presupposes a steady traffic between the realm of the living and the realm of the deities, Hinduism suggests that the two realms are in essence one, and that one of the ways to affirm the underlying unity of creation is through dance.

"Hinduism" is actually an umbrella term for an ancient and enormously varied tradition of religious inquiry and experience. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, this tradition has no clearly defined beginning or identifiable founder. Instead of a single authoritative work of scripture, Hinduism finds expression in a vast body of written and iconographic material produced over a period of some two thousand years. So diverse are the religious experiences possible under the umbrella of Hinduism that some foreign observers have equated it with polytheism. More accurately, it is a tradition of multiculturalism that embraces many sects whose differing approaches to divinity vary in both the

form and the object of their devotions.

What might appear in the West as a panoply of conflicting and even contradictory points of view is not seen that way in India. Indian philosophers and religious teachers have debated long and hard about the nature of the world and humanity's place in it; and different schools of thought have advanced different solutions to the problems of appearance and reality, good and evil, duty and desire, spirituality and sensuality. But all the competing formulations have at least two things in common: a belief in the underlying unity of existence and a determination to exclude no aspect of life in the search for the meaning of life. This insistence that *all the pieces must* ultimately fit together in a satisfying whole has shaped Hinduism's attitude toward the body. Far from being seen as an impediment to spiritual enlightenment, the body is treated as a tool for achieving greater insight and understanding. Is it any wonder that in India—where the gods dance—the dancing body can be both a source of pleasure and a vehicle of worship?

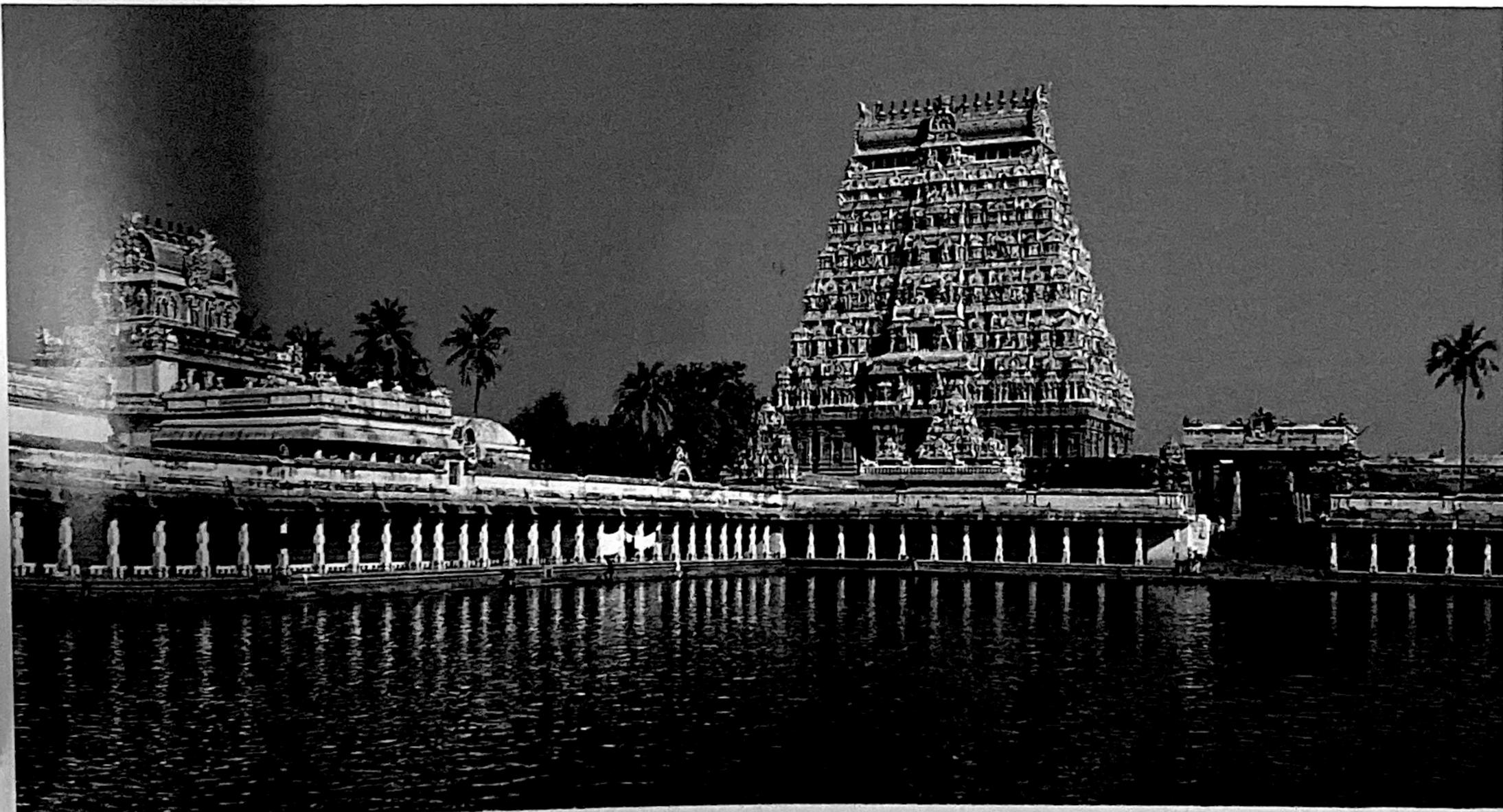
Dance in India takes a bewildering variety of forms. Of these, two in particular—bharata natyam and kathakali—exemplify the ways in which dance and religion intersect in Indian life. Both reached a high state of development at the southern tip of the subcontinent. Bharata natyam is a solo for a highly trained female dancer; it traces its origins to the devotional dances once performed within Hindu temples. Kathakali is a dance drama in which a troupe of highly trained performers enact stories about heroes, deities, and demons from the great epics of Hindu

mythology. Both bharata natyam and kathakali have long histories, both have changed radically over the years, and both are now considered exemplars of classical Indian culture, although their survival was seriously in doubt only a few decades ago.

The basic strategy of Indian dance was laid down some two thousand years ago in the *Natya Shastra*, a treatise that describes and analyzes the techniques employed in the Sanskrit plays of that time. These plays were a form of dance drama, performed for an educated elite. In one sense, the *Natya Shastra* is a the-

ater manual, spelling out in great detail all aspects of the performer's art, from an elaborate sign language of hand gestures, known as mudras, to specific conventions of makeup and costuming. Yet this eminently practical theater guide has long been revered as one of the hallowed texts of the Hindu tradition. The cornerstones of that tradition are four works known as the Vedas (from the Sanskrit word for knowledge), parts of which date back to the second millennium B.C. The Vedas contain prayers, hymns, and ritual formulas for sacrifices to propitiate a pantheon of

The temple at Chidambaram in southern India is dedicated to the dancing Shiva, the favorite deity of the Chola kings (846–1173), who once maintained a palace close to this shrine. Among the many dance-related carvings in the temple are scenes illustrating all 108 karanas, units of movement that are discussed in the classic Indian treatise on dance, the two-thousand-year-old Natya Shastra. Similar poses can be found in the dances of today's bharata natyam performers.



deities identified with the forces of nature; to ensure their efficacy, the sacrifices had to be performed with the strictest attention to detail; down to the least spoken syllable and smallest ritual gesture. The *Natya Shastra* (which is known as "the fifth Veda") likens theatrical performances to Vedic sacrifices. It asserts that dance drama, properly performed, "emboldens the weak, energizes the heroic, enlightens the ignorant and imparts erudition to the scholars" by showing humanity and divinity as they really are.

This high purpose is accomplished by arousing certain emotional states in the audience—not ordinary, transitory emotions but emotions "universalized" to reveal what is common in everyone's experience. Such emotions are called *rasas* (after the Sanskrit word for flavor, or juice). The *Natya Shastra* identifies eight fundamental *rasas*; these can be rendered into English as love, humor, pathos, anger, heroism, terror, disgust, and wonder. (Later commentators added a ninth *rasa*, serenity, which is said to encompass all the others.)

A dramatic performance should aim at the arousal of *rasa* in the audience. The eight (or nine) *rasas* must be distinguished from the thirty-three "transitory" feelings, which include despondency, languor, envy, and elation; these feelings are personal in a way that the aesthetically refined *rasas* are not. Those in the audience who experience the *rasa* of love are not "in love" with the performer or the character portrayed, any more than those who experience the *rasa* of anger are led to begin fighting with the people sitting next to them. The *Natya Shastra* com-

pares *rasa* to the experience of eating an especially good meal. In South India, where spices are abundant and the cuisine is pungent and aromatic, a single dish may contain many different condiments. But rather than focus on the individual flavors, the gourmet derives pleasure from the overall impression produced by their blend. In the same way, the attention of the *rasika*, the knowledgeable spectator, is drawn to the underlying unity of the aesthetic experience, which at its peak resembles the bliss of the religious devotee contemplating the deity.

To realize this aspiration requires a joint effort by performer and audience. In classical forms like *bharata natyam* and *kathakali*, the performer is expected to bring the same single-minded dedication to a performance as the devotee brings to a prescribed ritual. The *rasika* must come prepared to appreciate the nuances of the performance and, by his vocal and physical responses, to enhance the performer's ability to evoke *rasa*, which in turn will heighten the *rasika*'s responses. Instead of a separation between performer and spectator, the goal is a collaboration, a shared experience of *rasa*. Since physical control is essential to the performer's art, it is the performer's duty to bring his body under as complete control as possible. The techniques go far beyond anything taught in Western theater. For example, the *Natya Shastra* enumerates seven movements of the eyebrow and nine movements of the eyelid that must be mastered in order to evoke *rasa* properly.

The contemporary dance form known as *bharata natyam* is a direct descendant of the devotional dances

performed in the temples of south India from about the tenth century until the middle of this century. The focus of activity in a Hindu temple is an icon through which the presence of a god can be invoked by properly performed rites. These rites include "waking" the deity with prayers and bathing, clothing, feeding, and entertaining the consecrated image with offerings of various kinds. With the flowering of temple worship in the south, in what is now the state of Tamil Nadu, there emerged a special class of temple servants called *devadasis*. These were women who were "married" to the god of the temple, somewhat as Roman Catholic nuns are wed to Christ; one of their tasks was to please the god with offerings of dance in which passages from Sanskrit texts were interpreted. Evidence for this practice can be found on the walls of many Indian temples which are decorated with reliefs of dancers in hundreds of graceful poses familiar to devotees of Indian dance today. The most famous of the temples dedicated to the dancing Shiva is at Chidambaram, 120 miles from Madras. Here, as in other temples throughout India, can be found variants of the basic position of all classical Indian dance: the dancer stands with knees bent, feet turned sideways, and arms either extended to both sides or placed firmly on the waist.

It is not possible to re-create the actual dance of the *devadasis* from the temple sculptures, but it is known that the principles of the *Natya Shastra* were adopted and passed down, in an oral tradition, by the dance instructors who taught the *devadasis*. Temple dance was supported by the royal patrons of the

One of the most famous Hindu temples, not least for its many erotic scenes, is the Surya Deul of c. 1240 at Konarak, in eastern India. Called the Black Pagoda by early European mariners, for whom it was a useful landmark on the route to Calcutta, it is dedicated to Surya, the sun god. Numerous dancers and musicians cover the temple, greeting the rising sun each day.



temples and by wealthy worshipers eager to earn religious merit. Some temples had as many as four hundred devadasis who took turns dancing in the sanctum of the temple, where only higher-caste Hindus could enter. But once a year, when the image of the god was paraded through the streets in a joyous celebration, the dancers of the temple displayed their devotional art to the entire population.

The devadasis had other skills as well. In later years, some functioned as court dancers, whose devotion was directed toward the king rather than the god. In order to fulfill their function as interpreters of Sanskrit texts, devadasis were often highly educated in music and literature as well as dance; and their companionship was sought after by princes, courtiers, and scholars. Historians argue about whether the eastern Mediterranean custom of "sacred prostitution" was ever widely practiced in India. In any case, the distinction between temple dancers and other dancers who entertained admirers for a fee was not always clearly drawn; and the moral reputation of the devadasis fluctuated from time to time and place to place. By the end of the nineteenth century the concerns of disapproving Indians were reinforced by the preconceptions of British moral reformers, and the standing of temple dancers fell to an all-time low. In 1927 Gandhi wrote: "There are, I am sorry to say, many temples in our midst in this country which are no better than brothels." After a campaign led by public-spirited citizens in the name of the exploited devadasis, temple dancing in India was banned.

But the dance itself refused to die.



A few dancers and teachers whose families had nurtured the art for generations continued to pass it down to a handful of disciples. In accord with the burgeoning movement for political independence, poets and writers who had championed the indigenous literatures of India took up the cause of India's traditional dances, alongside a vanguard of higher-caste women who braved criticism from their peers to study with the remaining devadasis. (It was unheard of at the time for women of the Brahmin caste to dance in public.) Foremost among these pioneers was the late Rukmini Devi, whose studies led her in 1934 to establish Kalashetra, a school in Madras that attracts musicians and dancers who want to combine religious devotion with the performing arts. Because the authorship of the *Natya Shastra* is traditionally credited to the sage Bharata, the newly invigorated

classical dance came to be known as *bharata natyam*. The social standing of this dance form, which is now seen exclusively in theatrical settings, has undergone a curious revolution; *bharata natyam* dancers today tend to be women of the middle and upper classes.

According to Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, one of India's foremost dance scholars, the Indian dancer uses the body to suggest an abstract, universal form. Unlike classical Western dance, such as ballet, the conquest of gravity through impressive leaps has no part in *bharata natyam* technique: "The Indian dancer's preoccupation is not so much with space as with time, and the dancer is constantly trying to achieve the perfect pose which will convey a sense of timelessness." For this reason the dancer emphasizes not the muscles of her body but the skeleton, the joints and the underlying bone structure. The result is a "sculptur-

esque" quality in which all movement begins and ends in a moment of balance—visualized as a straight line dividing the body in half from head to foot.

The *bharata natyam* dancer appears on stage wrapped in a sari-like garment of brightly colored silk, highlighted in gold, over leggings of the same material; from her waist falls a fan-pleated apron that swings open when she bends at the knees, her bare feet joined heel to heel beneath her in the characteristic pose seen in so many temple reliefs. The edges of her feet are outlined in bright red paint; around each ankle she wears a circlet of bells, and her hair, ears, neck, nose, and wrists are hung with jewelry. But the moment the dance begins any suggestion of pliant femininity in the dancer's appearance is belied by the sheer athleticism, the bodily control, the strength and power of her every movement. A *bharata natyam* performance

Malavika Sarrukai performing bharata natyam, a classical dance form that evolved from the dances of the temple servants called devadasis; bharata natyam is now performed in theatrical settings.

Opposite: These two paintings of c. 1800 from Tanjore in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadhu show a street entertainer and a temple dancer (devadasi), both with musicians.





The young Balasaraswati in Madras, India, 1934. Descended from a long line of dancers and musicians, Balasaraswati played an important role in the revival of classical Indian dance in the first half of the twentieth century.

blends two complementary styles of movement: abstract dance sequences that stress virtuosity and rhythmic improvisation, and expressive dance sequences that seek to interpret classical poetry through mime. The dancer, who is accompanied onstage by a drummer, two other instrumentalists, and a singer, is also the choreographer; she determines the basic rhythm cycles, the poetic text to be used, and the specific interpretation of the text.

In the abstract dance sequences, dancer and drummer play off each other as in a jazz ensemble, except that the goal is not to make a personal statement but to explore, with a kind of selfless joy, the endlessly intriguing possibilities of interlocking rhythms. As her feet beat out a complex tattoo on the

ground, the sound enhanced by the jingling of her ankle bells, the dancer becomes a percussion instrument who interweaves her cadences with the beat laid down by the drummer. Connoisseurs of the art claim they can judge the worth of a performer with their eyes closed.

In the expressive dance sequences, the singer establishes a mood by chanting a poetic verse, and the dancer elaborates on it in mime, using movements of her upper body, hand gestures, and facial expressions. The poetry is typically drawn from the allegorical genre of Indian literature that employs erotic language to evoke spiritual ecstasy—as in these lines from the *Gita Govinda* (*Song of Krishna as Cowherd*) by the twelfth-century poet Jayadeva:

Make a mark with liquid deer musk
on my moonlit brow!
Make a moon shadow, Krishna!
The sweat drops are dried. . . .
Fix flowers in shining hair loosened
by loveplay, Krishna!
Make a flywhisk outshining peacock
plumage to be the banner of
Love. . . .
My beautiful loins are a deep cavern
to take the thrusts of love—
Cover them with jeweled girdles,
cloths, and ornaments, Krishna!

The dancer mimes the actions of each character in turn: Krishna the divine lover, Radha his beloved, and Radha's female friend and confidant. During these dramatic passages, knowledgeable spectators focus on the performer's arms, hands, and eyes; as she shifts back

and forth between the three roles, she is judged by her interpretive skills and by the depth of the emotional response she elicits from the audience. While many of the hand gestures are standard—their codification goes back to the *Natya Shastra*—the dancer has a certain leeway in the way she approaches a scene. For example, in the legends of Krishna's childhood, the young god's mother catches him eating mud and orders him to open his mouth; when he does, she beholds the entire cosmos behind his jaws. Rather than attempt to mime "the cosmos," the dancer may choose to capture the essence of the scene by reproducing the look of wonder in the mother's eyes as she fathoms the true nature of the son she has raised.

To permit a bharata natyam dancer to delve more deeply into the layers of meaning in a particular line of poetry, the singer may chant the line over and over during a performance; on each repeat, the dancer can explore a different aspect of the text. The dancer Balasaraswati, who died in 1984 after a career that spanned more than forty years, was one of the key figures in the revival of bharata natyam. Heiress to a long family tradition of music and dance, she was especially acclaimed for the expressive quality of her mime. Her most famous interpretive piece was a poem beginning, "Krishna, come soon and show me your face; Krishna, come with bells on your feet and blue pendants in your ears. . . . O Lord, come dancing with me." Balasaraswati's admirers insist that she could "dance" the same line fifteen times in a row, each time differently.

Hindu devotional poetry traditionally

expresses the longing of the devotee for union with the deity as the longing of the female for union with the male. But there is nothing in Indian tradition that warrants reducing physical union to a mere metaphor for the spiritual. Dr. Vatsyayan is emphatic on the point: "Let's make no mistake about spirituality in India being opposed to the body. I'm sorry, but this is not a life-denying culture. There is very early textual evidence, as early as one thousand B.C., of dance being used as a divine vehicle of temptation as well as salvation. The gods send the apsaras, heavenly nymphs, to distract meditating hermits from undue austerities. Of course, the ultimate purpose is to restore order to the universe. But the vehicle is carnal desire—seduction in the name of cosmic balance."

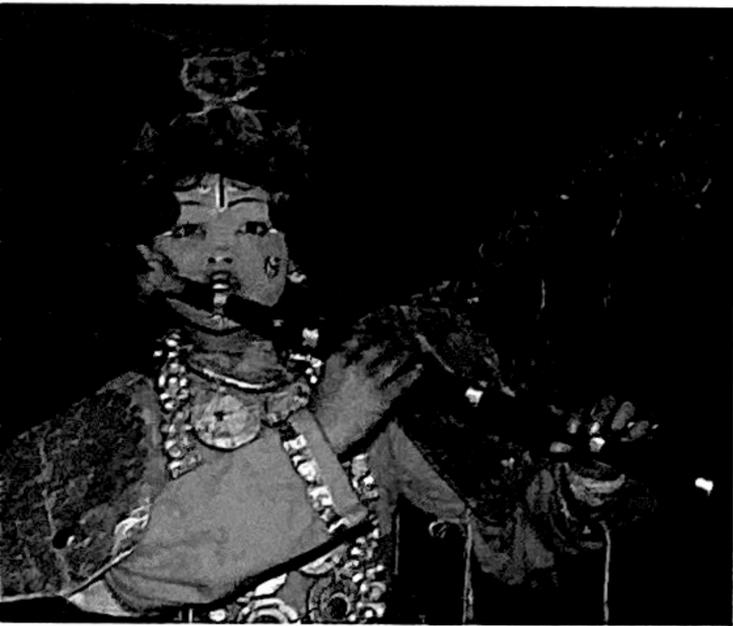
The preparation of a bharata natyam dancer is often compared to that of a ballet dancer. Instruction and physical training begin at an early age, typically six or seven. Like ballet dancers, bharata natyam performers must first master a vocabulary of basic steps, positions, and gestures, out of which the most complex dance sequences can be fashioned; and like ballet, bharata natyam requires enormous powers of concentration and bodily discipline. But to a performer like Malavika Sarrukai, who has traveled widely from her home base in Madras, there is a significant difference between the attitudes of the two traditions toward the dancing body:

"We don't have the same . . . what shall I say, aggression on our bodies? The things ballet dancers do with their bodies onstage, extending them to such great limits, so beautiful, but also

painful and even dangerous. . . . We don't do it that way. We approach it in a different way. We put more emphasis on mind than on technique. For one thing, an Indian dancer can expect to keep performing into her forties and beyond, so we have more time to develop. Whenever I read a poem I ask myself: Does this have something in it that can be danced? Sometimes images come to me spontaneously: images, movements, symbols. If I like the feeling, then I take the poem to my scholar and ask him to give me a line-by-line, word-by-word interpretation of the text. Then I sit with the music and the poem and start constructing the dance.

"Really, dance is observation of life." As a dancer, you have to be open to everything happening around you—how does a flower blossom, how do people talk to each other, how do they stand, how do they sit, what are they expressing with their bodies?—and all this is stylized into the language of dance. I feel that there is a very close relationship between human emotions and nature. I would like, in the short time of the performance, for the audience to feel this."

Unlike bharata natyam, the all-male dance drama called *kathakali* (the word means "story play") did not begin as temple worship per se. But it traces part of its heritage to an ancient tradition of presenting Sanskrit plays as votive offerings in temples along the Malabar coast, in what is now the southwestern state of Kerala. This coastal region, which was conducting a vigorous spice trade with the Mediterranean world even before the rise of the Roman Empire, has always taken pride in its cultivation of



the dramatic arts. In the seventeenth century two neighboring kings composed devotional plays of their own and organized rival troupes to perform them. One of these plays, drawn from incidents in the life of Rama, brought together two innovations that led to the later development of kathakali. The poetic verses were written in Malayalam, the language of the region, instead of classical Sanskrit; and the burden of reciting the dialogue was left to two singers, who stood alongside two drummers at the back of the stage; this freed the performers to concentrate on communicating the sense of the poetry through mimetic body language. The performers, all male, were by no means lacking in physical resources, having been recruited from the local military caste.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries kathakali underwent

a remarkable evolution into a kind of "people's theater." Hundreds of plays, typically based on stories from the great Hindu epics, were written for troupes sponsored by rulers and rich landholders. At some point the kathakali troupes began performing in the public areas outside village temples. These areas, which serve as local meeting places and social centers, are open to people of any caste (which is not true of the temples themselves). A new audience for kathakali developed. Under the patronage of princes who regarded themselves as *rasikas* no conscious effort was made to cater to the taste of the uneducated; in fact, standards of performance were codified with an eye on the rules laid down in the *Natya Shastra*. Yet by the beginning of the twentieth century kathakali had evolved into a uniquely powerful form of dance drama, religious

Opposite: The Ramayana and the Bhagavata Purana, millennia-old Sanskrit epics celebrating the exploits of Rama and Krishna respectively, are held in reverence wherever Indian culture has left its mark; dance dramas based on these works, and on the epic known as the Mahabharata, are presented in ritual settings throughout Southeast Asia. The traveling dance troupe (above) performed dance dramas in Indian villages in the 1920s. At the Kumari-jatra festival in Kathmandu, Nepal (below), a young boy is Krishna, the Dark Lord, with his characteristic flute and blue face.

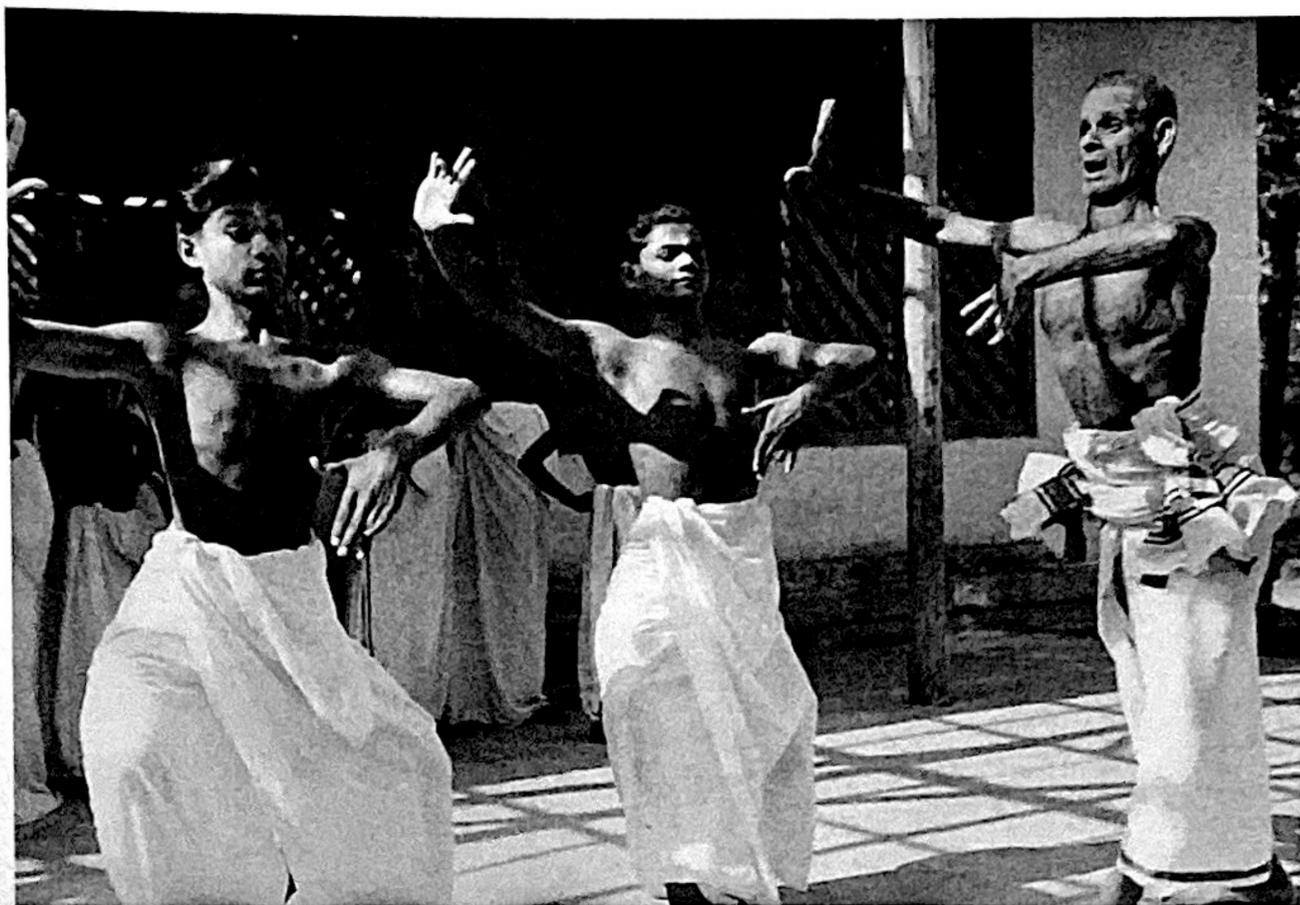


in content, classical in form, popular in appeal.

Then, during the same period that the devadasi tradition was coming under attack, kathakali went through a crisis. By the 1920s changing economic conditions had made it difficult for aristocratic patrons to continue their support of kathakali troupes. And influenced by British culture, some educated Indians had come to scorn kathakali as a kind of "primitive dumb-show." The art might have died out altogether if not for the efforts of the Malayali poet Vallathol Narayana Menon. In 1930 he established the Kerala Kala Mandalam, an academy of the dramatic arts, to ensure that future generations would be able to see kathakali performed according to the high standards established in the previous centuries.

Students enter the academy at the age of eleven or twelve for a minimum stay of six years. Many apply; those who gain admission are judged to have a strong physique, a strong sense of rhythm, and sufficient dedication to endure the more rigorous parts of the curriculum—including a daily "massage" in which a teacher walks over the student's oiled body. This is designed to render the joints supple and to facilitate the turnout from the hips that is required for the proper performance of kathakali. The walking massage, like other aspects of the regimen, was borrowed from the local schools of martial arts; these schools teach a method of physical discipline and body control that has a recorded history of more than a thousand years in Kerala.

In contemporary Western societies, physical discipline is typically thought



of in terms of athletics; the training regimen of a ballet dancer is compared to that of an Olympic runner, swimmer, or skater. But in India, as in ancient Greece, physical discipline is seen as a prerequisite to mental and spiritual discipline. In Kerala, young men (and recently young women as well) learn the arts of offense and defense through a carefully graded system of exercises embedded in a moral and religious context. Instruction takes place in a gymnasium called a kalari. Each time they enter the kalari—a windowless rectangular building with an immaculately swept earthen floor—trainees salute its guardian deity by reverently touching the floor with the right hand and then raising it to the forehead. During training they learn to center all their actions and reactions in the lumbar region, which is seen as the real source of breath, voice, and physical

Students at the Kerala Kala Mandalam, in the southern Indian state of Kerala. One young boy is receiving his daily "massage," in which a teacher walks over the student's oiled body to render the joints supple and to facilitate the turnout from the hips that is required for the proper performance of kathakali. Other boys are practicing the part of Krishna, the warrior Arjuna's divine charioteer, as he reins in a team of horses. This is a celebrated episode of the Bhagavad Gita, a long devotional poem that forms part of the Mahabharata.

movement. In mock combat advanced students perform spectacular leaps in which they turn in midair and land in a split ready to parry an opponent's thrust.

Kathakali performers must bring a similar physical prowess to their enactment of stories from the Hindu epics. **No other Indian dance form makes such demands on the body.** Although costumes are oversized and makeup is elaborate, the performer's feet are bare, as in the kalari. All movements on stage emanate from the basic kathakali stance, in which the performer bends his knees, arches his back slightly, and balances on the outer edges of his feet (which are kept apart); this stance produces a state **of alert tension**, as in a person on the verge of action. Dance sequences call for acrobatic leaps, spiral turns, vigorous leg extensions. The stamina of kathakali performers is legendary; many continue onstage well into their sixties.

The kathakali performer is physically transformed into a larger-than-life character through a process of costuming and makeup that can take up to three hours. This extended process of transformation resembles a **religious investiture.** First, thirty yards of starched white cloth are tightly wound around the performer's loins; over this go an elaborately embroidered, bell-shaped gown and several layers of bulky jackets and sashes, topped by an enormous halo-like headdress, which the performer salutes with a prayer before placing on his head. Makeup is designed to heighten facial expressions and to distinguish the different types of characters. **Gods, kings, and heroes always have green faces bordered with thick ridges of white rice paste and**

eyes outlined in black. Evil and vicious characters always have red beards, bristly white mustaches, and ugly white knobs protruding from nose and forehead. Characters that are generally nasty and arrogant but show some redeeming qualities have partly green faces with red mustaches and slightly smaller nose and forehead knobs. Most male characters display three-inch-long silver fingernails on the left hand. Female characters, also played by men, wear ordinary dresses with simpler makeup.

The basic purpose of kathakali costuming and makeup is to create an **otherworldly atmosphere, to distance the action onstage from everyday life.** The plays tell of legendary times, when gods and heroes and demons clashed in mighty battles of Good and Evil that shook heaven and earth and the netherworld. The atmosphere is charged with **superhuman energies.** In the words of Appukutan Nair, director of the Margi Academy of Dance in Kerala: "Different rules apply. If a man with a green face went walking on the sides of his feet down your street, you would laugh at him. If a kathakali performer walked like a normal person during a performance, *that* would be funny." To enhance the otherworldly atmosphere—and to make his expressive eye movements easier to see—the performer reddens the whites of his eyes with the juice of a crushed seed. Just before he goes onstage, he pauses to look in a **mirror; this is said to be the moment when his own personality subsides and the character comes to the surface.**

Except for demoniacal types who are unable to control their emotions and who emit rude grunts or growls, katha-

kali performers make no sounds whatever on stage. They must convey the *rasa* of a scene (as established by the chanted poetry and the mood-setting drumming) entirely through facial expressions and body movements. As in *bharata natyam*, a verse may be chanted two, three, four, five, six times in a row. This gives the performer an opportunity to mime more than one level of meaning, to improvise on the scene described in the poetry, and to squeeze every last bit of drama out of the situation. The different character types express their natures through distinct movement styles:

A hot-tempered demon stomps about like an overgrown child to demonstrate his unwillingness to listen to reason; the Lord Krishna moves with a masculine grace, even when he goes down on his knees in an effort to avert an impending war. Among kathakali performers and *rasikas* there is little discussion of the psychological state of a particular character; instead, attention is focused on the proper execution of gestures and movements needed to evoke *rasa*, which is the goal of the performance.

The sign language of hand gestures (*mudras*) in kathakali is even more elaborate than in *bharata natyam*. During their years of training students memorize specific *mudras* and practice them endlessly in front of mirrors and with each other. There are twenty-four primary *mudras* which, through combinations and variations and intricately detailed hand-dances, can convey over eight hundred recognizable meanings. Some are descriptive, some are symbolic, all vary depending on context. For example, one of the twenty-four primary *mudras* is a closed fist, said to have origi-

nated with Vishnu who used it to fight the demon Madhu. In depicting the lotus flower, a traditional symbol of beauty, the performer begins with two closed fists, pointing downward, the right crossed over the left; as the fists are slowly relaxed, the hands pivot and turn upward, with palms facing and close together, to signify a tightly curled lotus bud; then, ever so slowly, the hands begin to open as if the bud were spreading its petals. Throughout this pantomime the performer's eyes respond with delight to each stage of the flower's growth; when its petals are fully open, the performer's nostrils quiver slightly at the first faint scent of the flower's perfume.

Some scenes in kathakali plays turn on an extended sequence of full-body pantomime, such as the "peacock dance" from the play *Narakasura Vadham*. Narakasura is in a garden (the typical setting for love scenes) with his wife. In a line or two of dialogue (chanted by the onstage singers), Narakasura directs his wife's attention to the peacocks roaming about the garden; by their graceful movements, the verse says, you can tell that they too take pleasure in the beauty of this setting. At these words the actor begins to mime the "dance" of the birds as they preen their feathers, stretch, and strut about; when the dance ends, the performer slips effortlessly back into his characterization of Narakasura.

Kathakali is often performed today in conventional theaters, under the sponsorship of local rasikas who band together into dues-paying kathakali clubs. However, this form of dance drama is best seen in something closer to

its original setting, on a raised stage of packed earth just outside a small village temple in Kerala. The performance begins shortly after the sun goes down; in traditional fashion it will end with the sunrise. In the gathering darkness the sound of drumming and clashing cymbals is heard. Spectators begin to take their places before the rectangular stage, women and children squatting cross-legged on the ground, men sitting on folding chairs along the sides. There is no admission fee; the performers who traveled to the village by bus earlier in the day will be paid by the temple's entertainment committee, which has organized the event to celebrate an important festival on the religious calendar. A large metal lamp with an oil-fed wick is set up at the front of the stage. Once this would have provided the only light for the performance; now its flickering flame is supplemented by a battery of electric bulbs. Small children dash about excitedly.

The play will depict selected episodes from the *Mahabharata*. Most people in the audience, even the children who may have seen only the popular comic-book version of the epic, are familiar with the characters and events; some of the rasikas have seen this particular play many times before. The audience is not expected to pay rapt attention at every moment; during the nine-hour performance people eat, talk, take a nap, get up to stretch their legs. But everyone settles down again when the major scenes begin. In one of those scenes, the green-faced hero Bhima confronts the red-bearded Dushasana who has humiliated Bhima's wife. The main rasa of this scene is anger. Bhima dances his hunger

for revenge; Dushasana dances his defiance. When they meet in battle, the fighting takes the form of an energetic duet to a constant clatter of drums and crashing cymbals. Linked hand to hand, the combatants wheel about the stage, each propelling the other to new heights of rage. Inevitably, Good triumphs over Evil; with his mace Bhima knocks Dushasana to the ground. But now it is clear that Bhima's emotions have gotten out of control, a serious violation of the code of the warrior as expressed in the *Mahabharata*. Bending over his foe, the long fingernails of his left hand quivering with the passion of the moment, Bhima buries his face in Dushasana's torn belly, rips out his enemy's entrails, and drinks his blood. The deed completed, Bhima begins to return to his senses; the bloody entrails fall from his mouth as Lord Krishna enters. Suddenly aware of what he has done, Bhima falls on his face before Krishna to beg forgiveness. As he receives the lord's benediction, Bhima's entire manner changes; anger visibly drains from his body, to be replaced by the tender mood of pathos.

The entire scene encapsulates one of the great moral lessons of the *Mahabharata*: Without self-control a man is no better than a beast. To the rasikas in the audience, one of the transcendent experiences of the kathakali stage is the moment when the expression on Bhima's face changes, signaling a shift from the rasa of anger to the rasa of pathos under the influence of Lord Krishna. At such moments, kathakali fulfills its purpose as a stage where the workings of divinity are made manifest through the vehicle of the human body.



An Ottan Tullal performance outside a village temple near Trichur, Kerala, October 1991. This one-man show blends elements of kathakali and even older dance dramas into a form of popular entertainment.



Lankalakshmi (left) is a malevolent incarnation of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, according to this kathakali actor from Kerala, India, who plays this role, although many devotees of the goddess might dispute the existence of such an alter ego. He has blackened his face with lamp-black and reddened his eyes with the juice of a seed to heighten his facial expressions.

Below, a kathakali performance by a traveling troupe from the Kerala Kala Mandalam. The play is The Dice Game, an episode from the Mahabharata in which a dispute over control of a kingdom leads to an epic battle between two sets of cousins, the Pandavas, seen here, and the Kauravas.

