Dancing Bodies, Soaring Souls: Exploring Spirituality in Dances across Cultures

by

Shreelina Ghosh
ghoshsh2@msu.edu

Spirituality is interwoven into the fabric of Indian culture and that is evident in its artistic expressions. In Odissi, the body of the dancer is considered a temple, and the deity is taken to be residing within. Through the practice of the dance, the dancer attempts to create a relationship between the moving body and the soul that internalizes spirituality. The dancers wear a chuda or a white cone on the head to indicate the conical structure on top of the Orissan temples (See Fig.1).

As an artiste, I experience and acknowledge the communication of the performing body with the inner spiritual self, with is externalized in the Rasas. What an artist feels inside him or her during the act of performing dance or theatre is called bhaava. What an artist expresses in front of the audience or the emotion that the audience shares with the artist in the course of the performance is called Rasa. For instance, when the heroine waits for the lover, she feels Rati bhaava in her. Her dance movements will therefore express Shringar Rasa. Rasa is the feeling that the audience shares with the artist. Without the presence of the
audience, rasa will not gain fulfillment, it will remain a bhaava or just the emotional state of the artiste's mind that fails to touch the audience. This relationship shows the body and the mind during the performance of dance.

To the Odissi dancer, spirituality is not only important in the process of performing but also in the way that it is learned. Originally, the practices and traditions of the ancient Odissi dance were seldom textually documented. What is known about the origins of the dance was mostly transmitted orally by the Guru to disciple, thus preserving the sacred art in living memory. Traditionally, Odissi has been taught by Gurus (masters); it is a demanding art that takes years of training and focuses on precise and meaningful movements in which the body, presence, and aesthetics play are central to its performance and learning. The knowledge of the art is handed down from generation to generation by the Guru. Guru is derived from the Sanskrit root [gṛ], which means, “to praise or invoke.” In the word Guru, gu signifies darkness, 'darkness', and ru signifies 'the one who destroys’. Guru is not only the one that instills knowledge, but the one who destroys darkness and provides the student with light to unfold truth, knowledge and wisdom. Guru is considered to be the human form of abstract divinity that helps in illuminating one’s knowledge and helping one realize God just as the Guru himself has realized. Odissi dance, has survived through the generations of the Guru-Shishya parampara or master-student tradition. Learning in the Guru-Shishya method involves complete surrendering to the Guru and absorbing the knowledge of the Guru in one’s self.
Dance is an important part of the African-American community in the United States (See Fig.2). When I first experienced this dance, the two qualities of the dance that struck me were aggressiveness and exaggerated eroticism. This interest led me to delve further into the nature of African-American dance and its relationship with the historical trauma of slavery and violence.

African-American dances are performed with a dual purpose. One is to communicate meanings with expressive gestures. The other purpose involves internalizing spirituality to achieve a state of purity. This duality is described in Lepecki’s collection on African-American rhetoric of performative practice. Thomas F. DeFrantz, in a powerful chapter, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power”, reveals the essence of spirituality of African-American dance and the dual transcripts of “public” and “private” meaning of black social dance (See Fig.3). The outwardly entertaining transcript has a secretly derisive rhetoric that is intriguing (Lepecki 64).
According to Roger D. Abrahams, “Black power in social dance is a sacred holding, a trust of rhythmic legibility and cultural responsibility... In this model, the forces that drive the dance are intangible, and power in the dance is attained by aligning ourselves with the submerged rhythmic and linguistic potentials of the beat. Working in the service of a communal conversation with others, the dancer creates dialogue by making the beat visible and shaping its accents into coherent phraseology. Ironically, the body creates the movement, but the body as a physical entity disappears in the midst of its own statements” (72). This is reflective of the African spiritual dances that are performed to bold drumbeats. Modern African-American dances bear influences that are historically and culturally significant and intrigue (See Fig.4).

The connection of the spiritual and the social is not weak or casual. It is but a manifestation of spiritual strength that is displayed with the rhetoric of anger and intimidation, thereby creating a “bifurcation” with the audience (73). This might be the way in which the dancer acknowledges the objectification of his/her black body.
Spirituality is thus defined beyond the concept of a God in a religious sense. It denotes a positive inner strength, also otherwise understood as God in some cultures.

“If spirituality is accessed by good dancing, religiosity may, then, be the unspoken subject and source of the dancer’s action, its root.” The motion and the meaning of the expression abstractifies the material body and its presence is in the expression of the spirituality alone. Body moves as it dances in order to achieve a certain goal. The purpose of the dance or the aspiration of the dancer is to reach that state of perfect purity, “of expressing the self by manipulating basic movement utterances”.

(Lepecki 75)

The performative practice known as Stomp dance is practiced in Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, in central United States (See Fig.5). Stomp dance is an esoteric spiritual dance that is practiced as a religious community event. Like African-American and Indian classical dance, this dance is a bearer of sacred memory of the Cherokee spirituality. The spiritual element of this practice is considered “sacred and private”, which is one reason the community refused to publish the information and digitize the dance for anyone beyond the Cherokee community (Cushman, Ghosh). The dancers place a great deal of importance to adornment, or aharya. The bodies reflect the traditional memories of indigenous identity. The dance is codified like Indian classical dances, which means that it adheres to set patterns of movement that hold spiritual and emblematic significances.
A sacred fire is built around which men and women dance. People outside the community are invited to experience the performance as onlookers. “Video and cameras are forbidden on the oldest stomp grounds”, so is digitization of sacred texts and dance performances in any way. According to Cushman, the practice of this dance symbolizes and enacts the “harmonic relationships between men, women, children, and the universe” (Cushman, Ghosh).

It is interesting to locate these moments and events across cultures where the body and the soul integrate in an artistic expression. The possibilities of these are sometimes internalized and private, often concealed within other messages. It is the profound implication of a divine relationship between Radha and Krishna that underlies the symbolist portrayal in the choreography of *yadhunandhana chandana sisira-tharENa karE Na payOdharE*. Spirituality and erotic sensuousness are juxtaposed uniquely in the dance. A similar message is invoked in an African-American dance. At other times, spirituality is expressed openly in the performance, as an invocation of a deity or a prayer. The connection of the practice to spirituality in some dances is obvious and clear. The spiritual layer of dance elevates it towards an aspiration of a goal that is higher than
the more immediate aesthetic goal. This aspiration is integral to several cultures across the world and this association helps us understand the common grounds of art.

References:


Note: The images used in this article have been assessed as being in the public domain and are used according to their licenses.