
Circle Dance *versus* Folk Dance

Marina Bear goes 'undercover' to experience the differences and similarities between these two communities

Over the years, I've heard so many opinions offered about the difference between Circle Dance and International Folk Dance. I decided to experience for myself a folk dance group, and to try to articulate what we have that's different. I'm finding that it's not as easy to write about as I thought it would be. I've really enjoyed my 'undercover evenings'. I want to be fair but not impartial – I'm still a Circle Dancer first. However, I don't claim to know at all why more people turn up for folk dance than we get in circle dance, although I'll offer some speculation at the end of this piece.

So I joined the Berkeley Folk Dance (BFD) group. BFD has been going for more than 60 years and claims over 200 members. They meet in a community centre that has a very large gymnasium-type room with a wooden floor, very bright lighting and an atmosphere about as aesthetic as a gymsock.

The Beginners' Class had over 40 people in it, although I discovered that there were quite a few members of their more advanced groups in it who turned up to keep things moving along.

The most obvious difference was in the fact that there were almost as many men as women in the group. Quite a few of the men came along with their female partners. The average age was similar to our circles, but there were three or four

younger men who came on their own. The gender equality turned out to be important, as fully three-quarters of the dances we did were couple dances, although most of them either progressed so we changed partners throughout or the teachers would announce 'Men move on to a new partner' and instructions were always given in terms of men's and women's parts. On the nights where there were few men, women were given red ribbons to wear if they chose to dance the men's part. It was generally the experienced dancers who volunteered to gender shift. I never saw a man take the 'woman's' part.

The teachers were longtime folk dancers. They were good teachers, but they demanded a level of performance that eliminated a few people each week for the first month. Although they worked with a music system that allowed them to slow the music down for learning, we were strongly encouraged to get things up to speed and I left every evening having broken out in a sweat. It was much more aerobic than most of our circle dance evenings!

There were dances we do, but always with a slight variation. I had to stay alert – it's hard to re-learn something you know extremely well. For example, Alunelul is done with cross-behind steps. In fact, we were told that it would be

impossible to do it up to speed if you did side-together steps.

The women dancers seemed much more relaxed and interactive than the men. When a woman was dancing the men's part and we met in a progression, they'd smile, and occasionally say a word or two. The men were more businesslike and seemed intent on getting it all right. We learned a tango which was not a progressive dance and it felt almost robotic. If the point of having all these couple dances was to provide some kind of male-female interaction, it didn't seem to be operating at any level I could pick up. At times the teachers would point out stylistic differences between the way men and women might do something ('The men lift their feet higher here') but there was nothing as juicy as some of the Rom dances we do.

The main difference seemed to me to be the whole attitude towards the dance. In the Folk Dance Class, it seems as if the main object is to get the steps right and then you've done the dance. In Circle Dance, I've always felt that we share a belief that there is much more to our dances. When we do a traditional dance, we're stepping into a culture's history and tasting their lives, without pretending to be them. We're dancing in their moccasins, rather than trying to *be* Romanians, or whatever.

Whether we're doing a traditional dance or a modern choreography, there's usually something more – celebration, or ritual, or the possibility of an emotional or spiritual experience. And

it's that possibility which we honor by holding the circle at the end of a dance, rather than dropping hands immediately and clapping, or chattering, or walking off.

There's also the underlying assumption at our folk-dance class that the 'right' way to do the dance is the way the teachers present it. There's something honorable about trying to pass along a dance given to you in as accurate a way as possible, but certainly anyone who does traditional dance knows that villages have their own variations to familiar dances: One village does a grapevine in part two while 50 miles away they do two slip steps at the same point. Dancing with the Circle Dance group in Vancouver last summer, we were delighted to find the spirit of accessibility flourishing. When someone would take a 'wrong' step and apologize, the circle would say, "There are no mistakes; only variations." We go out of our way to make newcomers and beginners feel welcome and at ease, sometimes to the detriment of the older dancers' experience. It's a delicate balance between offering dances anybody can do and including some more challenging ones that a subset of the circle loves.

But it's in that concern for the people in the circle and the respect and care for them as whole people with rich, full lives which they bring to the dance that I find the greatest difference between folk and circle dance, at least in my limited local experience. I cannot imagine coming into a folk dance class and announcing a per-

sonal crisis that I felt the need to 'dance through'. Some of the most significant circle dance evenings have emerged when somebody announced a piece of news – good or tragic – and we stood there, feeling the personal impact of it, and then the leader for the evening said something like, 'What shall we do to honor this event and our responses to it?'. And we danced together. A friend who does both folk and circle dance said that 'affinity' named the feeling she experiences in Circle Dance – an empathy that points to the simplest human commonality and thus connection.

Perhaps the difference between the two groups traces back to fundamental ways each understands what dance is and what the experience of dancing together can be.

Folk Dance simply offers an opportunity to learn a variety of ethnic dances, usually with a clear 'lineage' – where it comes from and who taught it to me. Its instructors strive to maintain the dances intact, including style and sometimes 'attitude' as well as steps. That emphasis on the responsible transmission of the dances, admirable as it is, can sometimes engender in folk dancers a kind of pride that excludes people who aren't as experienced, or as quick to learn. If what we're here for is to dance, then people who enable me to dance well are the ones I want around. And if dance is the steps to appropriate music, any other aspect of the experience is irrelevant. A dance may itself lead me to experience something other than an elevated heart rate and a

sense of having gotten it right, but there's nothing to do with that experience in the context of the evening.

In Circle Dance, the assumption is that the form may carry the meaning, but the meaning is paramount. Whether we talk about it or not (and as a Circle Dance teacher I strongly resist telling people what they should experience in any dance), we believe that the whole person dances. It's said to be what Bernhard Wosein, who introduced Circle Dance at Findhorn, meant when he called it 'heilige tanz' – holistic dance. We tend to favor dances that carry more overt meaning: generic ones like turning from the dark to the light and specific ones like a bride's taking leave of her childhood home. Quite a few circle dance teachers enjoy giving background to the dances they teach when we know it – translating the name, as in Tsadik Katamar, or just saying 'It's a children's dance' gives it more context.

We assume that dancers are not just emotionally sensitive but available to experience the emotional and the spiritual aspects of dances. To that end, we try to pay attention to the whole experience for the circle, to make it an aesthetic experience. A clear, open dance space, outside or with windows that bring the natural world in is ideal. And we usually have a center. Some dancers call it an altar and use traditional directional elements in constructing it. Some use a simple candle and a few flowers. Not to pay attention to the setting feels like offer-

ing a banquet on paper plates with plastic cutlery.

A Circle Dance teacher strives to build a safe, supportive environment that involves encouraging dancers who may have difficulty 'getting' the steps to do what they can. We adapt dances on the fly to accommodate people's obstacles. If you can't turn easily in three steps, just take three walking steps to keep up with the movement of the circle. If your arm hurts and you can't do a shoulder hold, we'll find another hold for you, or put you at the end of a line on your 'good side'. The aim is always to make the experience of the dance accessible to the people who've come.

There's another aspect of Circle Dance that relates to the openness of approach. We do a number of dances that are contemporary choreographies. We're all folks, after all, and the dances called 'traditional' all emerged from some culture and some dancer or dancers in the past. We're keeping the tradition alive, responding to music old and new by creating dances to share.

Oh, and I never saw anybody dance barefoot in the folk dance class. I like the fact that we've got everything from bare feet to hiking boots in a circle. It's another part of that accessibility.

But to experience more than just the physical movement requires something we're not accustomed to – and certainly not used to in groups. It requires holding still in silence for a few moments and becoming attentive to your experience. Nobody requires you to say anything

about whatever you find, but at the end of an evening, sometimes people do share an insight or talk a bit about what a dance meant to them. So we often will just remain in the circle at the end of a dance for a few moments before starting on the next one.

A Circle Dance evening always has a definitive ending. It doesn't just stop. Most often there's a quiet, meditative dance done to close the evening and send us off in a peaceful frame of mind. When possible, we like to lower the lights and sometimes we'll dance with just the light from the candles in the center (remember the center?). Some dancers say the last dances are the reason they come – the experience is unique.

So why does the Berkeley Folk Dance group have 30 people on a Tuesday evening and enough members to hold a dance group every weekday evening and we have to work at keeping enough bodies in the circle to make the evening worthwhile? One answer might be that folk dancing is a known quantity. Almost everybody has had some exposure to it in elementary school classes or college clubs.

Circle Dance is not so easy to explain. I've been working at this article for over a week and I still think I haven't got it quite right. And the parts I do think I've identified would eliminate a large segment of people who would feel slightly threatened by anything they view as entertainment that seems to require participation on a level they don't quite understand. And I haven't even men-

tioned the use of the word 'sacred'. Many of our groups identify what they do as 'Sacred Circle Dance'. That's enough to send a whole subset of potential dancers running. Do we have to believe something to join in? Will it conflict with something I already believe? The challenge for us is to convey the good stuff we do, the accessibility, the friendliness, the depth of experience possible without making any of it sound mandatory. We can work on that. And then we just need to get the word out.

There are plenty of us who love Circle Dance, and I'm certain there are many more out there who would join us if only they knew.



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TIMES: Saturday 2pm to 9pm, Sunday 10.30am to 4.30pm.

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Traditional Circle Dance and the Roots of Ritual

**Laura Shannon explores how a ritual dance differs
from an ordinary circle dance**

For thirty years I have been researching and teaching traditional circle dances from Greece, the Balkans, and Armenia, particularly women's dances, dances of diaspora peoples such as the Roma, and traditional ritual dances.

What makes a ritual dance different from an ordinary circle dance?

A ritual occasion is distinguished by context, including a special day, place or milestone in life; special food, costumes, and symbolic items; special dances, songs and activities.¹ Everyday dances may take a different name on ritual occasions, according to who is dancing it and for what purpose; the Thracian dance generally known as Ksésyrtos, for example, is called Papisios when danced by old men, Babísios when danced by old women, and Knás when danced at the bridal henna party. The steps are the same; only the context differs.

Some ritual dance events, such as the village panegyri, may be open to everyone in the community, while some are restricted to specific participants (just the men; just the women; just the unmarried girls, and so on). Some ritual occasions combine both types: before a village wedding, only the bride's and bridegroom's relatives will dance at their respective houses, but in front of the church after the ceremony the whole village may be invited to join the dance. Knowing who is permitted to participate, and how, is essential to ritual.

In general, a ritual consists of a series of actions which take place according to a prescribed order. The word *ritual* has its origins in the Roman *ritus*, meaning the correct performance, custom, or way of doing something. Ritual order thus refers both to things happening in a correct sequence, and to things and people being in their correct place. The affirmation of social order also affirms cosmic order: as above, so below.

The definition of ritual as a series of specific actions repeated in a predictable order applies both to the ritual dance, with its series of steps, and to the dance ritual, with its series of actions. In both cases this predictability – the fact that everyone knows what will happen, both during the dance and during the day – enables participants to free the mind and concentrate on the inner work which is the purpose of ritual.

This consists of affirming our connection to, and participation in, the sacred cycle of life. Ritual invokes and praises the benevolent energy of nature, celebrating order in the cosmos and our part in it, to bless and protect the whole community. In the words of Maria-Gabriele Wosien, 'all ritual is universal and timeless in that it is