

Joyce Eleanor

RHYTHM, DRUMMING, SPIRITUALITY AND WOMEN

Handheld Frame Drums are among society's oldest known musical instruments. In prehistoric times, their rhythms helped shamans and seers attain the sacred trance state necessary for healing and prophecy. The rituals of the earliest known religions revolved around the beat of frame drums.

These religions were founded on the worship of female deities in the form of Mother Goddesses who evolved into the many goddesses of Mediterranean cultures in classical times. The development of these goddesses came about because ancient people saw women's bodies as holy, as they had the magical ability to give birth and create new life. In addition, the rhythm of the woman's body in conjunction with the rhythm of the moon fits into the pulse of life and nature's rhythm of seasons with its natural growth and decay aspects. The beat of the frame drum in these ancient societies was an integral part of the rites and festivals of the ancient world because of the pulse of life it represented.,

Women then became the first leaders of the sacred, performing religious functions we would today associate with the clergy or priesthood. Sacred drumming was one of their primary skills. It remained a powerful tool for communal bonding and individual transformation until the fall of the Roman Empire.

There is a rich vein of feminine wisdom at the core of Western civilization. In Egypt the goddess was known as Hathor, Isis, Sekhmet. In Sumerian Syro-Palestinian, and Cypriot cultures she was called Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte, Astoreth, Anat, Aphrodite. In Anatolia, Asia Minor, Crete, Greece, and Rome she was Cybele, Rhea, Demeter, Artemis, Ariadne, Persephone. All these historical goddesses sprang from an archetypal Great Goddess of the Paleolithic Age, when Cultures throughout the European and Western Asian world worshiped forms of a Divine Mother.

The goddess and those who performed her sacred rituals were female. The oldest of rituals were earth-based. The earth itself was revered as the "Great Mother of All That Is". Rhythmic music seems to have been particularly important in the rites associated with the ancient goddesses. In the oldest cultures, rhythm was revered as the structuring force of life. All life including plants and animals. evolved into a rhythmic web and the daily cycles of the sun indicated when it was time for activity and rest. Its seasonal cycles governed growth and decay. Ancient humans survived by understanding the natural rhythms of their environment.

Sacred drumming probably began as an echo of the human pulse which all humans experience as the pulse of our mother's blood in the womb. No other sensation is so basic. The beat of the priestesses' frame drums articulated this process of creation. Concentration on rhythm connects people with a universal energy, both internally and externally. Drumming engages the conscious mind, and like meditation, cuts back on its continual chatter.

Priestesses used the frame drum to summon the goddess and it was also the instrument through which the goddess spoke. The drumming priestess was the intermediary between divine and human realms.

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She used the sacred rhythms to summon and transform, invoking divine energy and transmitting it to the community.

The drum was the primary trance-inducing instrument in transition rites. People who concentrated on its rhythmic patterns could transcend ordinary consciousness. In rituals invoking death and rebirth, the drum signaled the release of outmoded behavior patterns and the transition to a new life.

The drum was associated with fertility which also encompassed human sexuality. The drum was associated with feminine sexual energy. Goddesses played the frame drum to increase the energy of sexual attraction and the powers of femininity. In menstruation and birthing rites, certain drum rhythms caused the womb to contract, aiding the flow of menstrual blood or facilitating labor in childbirth.

The forceful beat of the drum drove away evil spirits that spread discontent and disease while creating a purified space where health and well-being could flourish. It is thought that drumbeats were the earliest form of long-distance communication. The drum rhythms measured the tempo of laborers coordinating and energizing them to work for hours in a trance like flow of physical activity.

In India, Hinduism has preserved an unbroken history of goddess worship, music, art, and techniques for the development of consciousness. The fundamental goal of all forms of Hinduism is the reintegration of the individual with the universal through the expansion of consciousness.

The Sumerian city of Uruk, sacred to the goddess Inanna, was the site of the earliest known written language and these Sumerian texts describe rituals involving drumming and the making of sacred drums. The cities of Ur grew up around temple complexes which were built on holy ground where people converged to feel the presence of divine energies. They were centers of pilgrimage where communication between the heavens, the earth, and the underworld took place.

The cyclic energies of the seasons were preserved in the rhythm of the temple rituals. Music played an essential role in temple rituals and also in daily life. In processions on ceremonial occasions, the drum's sound "calmed and uplifted the men of the city." The drum was also a means of attracting divine attention. Texts from Uruk record an occasion when the sound of frame drums calmed and reassured the population during an eclipse.

In Egypt music was an indispensable part of religious life. Egyptian rites included ritual chanting with rhythmic sound and temples were acoustically designed to amplify the sound of this sacred music.

A complex of buildings serving the spiritual and physical needs of the community evolved around the central temple. Within the temple complex at Dendera was a mammisi, or birthing chapel. Frame drums and sistrums were used to create rhythms to guide women through the sacrosanct and physically dangerous time of childbirth.

For the Egyptians, thought was a vibrational energy that pervaded the physical world. They believed that mind, body, and spirit could be aligned with the ultimate divine intelligence by meditative practices coupled with the sacred sounds created by voice and musical instruments.

In the first millennium B.C., the priestesses of Cybele and her descendants had assumed the old shamanic function of prophecy. In the ancient world no one made decisions without consulting oracles. While methods of divination were numerous, the most dramatic mode was inspired utterance. This happened when the oracle was in the depths of ecstatic trance when the oracle was possessed by the deity who spoke directly through her lips. To enter this state, a number of external stimuli were used but many relied most heavily on the trance-inducing properties of music and dance.

The beating of the frame drum has been used in human history in two major ways: for spiritual transformation and for organizing war. The goddess cultures began to be invaded by war-like tribes who were either Kurgans or Aryans or Indo-European. The peaceful goddess-based cultures were no match for them. These tribes worshiped angry storm gods of vengeance and battle. They imposed their patriarchal social system on the tribes they conquered. However, the goddess did not disappear from Mediterranean culture until much later. In Crete and Anatolia, Egypt, India, Greece, and Rome, people continued to worship her in many forms. It took the fall of the Roman Empire for the storm god to complete his triumph.

The excesses and corruption that destroyed the Roman Empire also created an environment for the growth of Christianity. The early Roman Church fathers used their growing political and military power to end all traces of the Divine Feminine. They insisted on the exclusive worship of one male deity, served by a celibate, all-male priesthood. And because they recognized the intimate connection with women's spiritual power, they banned the sacred frame drum. Eventually, women were not even allowed to speak in church.

This did not happen without some difficulty and although the ancient goddesses lost their power, people accustomed to the attitudes of pagan religions were not easily giving up the worship of all other deities as demanded by the one God of Christianity. On pagan feast days, they would often throw off the constraints of Christian piety, succumbing to the seductive beat of the drum. The Church retaliated by forbidding the use of music in Christian worship. It was replaced by the singing of psalms a cappella.

Even though the people resisted these constraints, the Church would not compromise its ban. It made other concessions by initiating new rites designed to replace the pagan practices. All-night marathons of Communion were developed with Bible readings, prayer, and the singing of psalms. However, some of the people continued pagan practices and clerics complained that this led to debauchery in the darkest corners of the sanctuary. The Church responded by barring women from vigils. Misogyny was never far from the surface of Church actions and the predominance of women musicians in pagan cults contributed to this tendency to blame women for lapses in their rules for piety. Then, women were banned from singing and dancing to frame drums during funeral processions and eventually banned from funerals all together.

Despite these internal troubles, Christianity's political power grew greater and the Christians were determined to eradicate every trace of pre-Christian civilization leading to the burning of entire libraries, temples, and university systems. The status of women sank to a new low.

This wholesale assault on the ancient centers of learning and the scholars, musicians, and artists associated with pagan traditions was one of the factors that drove western Europe into the Dark Ages. Yet some men and women still clung to the old ways until the persecutions of the Inquisition finally ended it all.

Christian doctrine eventually succeeded in robbing women of their spiritual heritage, but it could not smother the human need for a divine feminine force and presence. This need found its outlet in the worship of Mary, Christ's mother.

Fortunately, the beat of the frame drum could not be silenced forever. Today many women have rediscovered their drum heritage. Men, also, have been drawn to the beat of the drum and all have found frame drumming transformative. We are rediscovering what the ancients knew, which is that drumming is a pathway to higher consciousness and the soul.