

THE SACRED CIRCLE DANCE AND THE NUMINOUS

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Chuvash ritual round dance around the sacred kiremet tree.

The Sacred Dance Movement is quite important in many countries. Bernard Wosien discovered the power of folk dancing (usually dancing in a circle) and began researching and collecting *Heilige Tänze* (Sacred Dances) because of their holistic power to heal people, transport people to a meditative level of consciousness, and connect with the Sacred (as Rudolf Otto describes it). In 1975, he began to work with the Findhorn sacred dancers in Scotland. Thus, the Sacred Dance Movement began with important foundations in Scotland and Brazil, and connections with the United Nations. To improve cooperation between all people, Brazilian Sacred Dance has been increasingly used in both educational and business venues.

This article presents an introduction to Sacred Circle Dance. My first contact with this practice was in 1995 during an important Holistic Conference held in Brazil: “The Imaginaria.”

The event gathered many important speakers such as Edgar Mitchell, the

American astronaut; Amir Klink, the Brazilian navigator and writer; many scientists; Brazilian natives from different Xingu Nations; Semu Huaute, the North American Indian Grandfather of the Chumash people; and many others such as Craig Gibsone, an elder from the Scottish Spiritual Community of Findhorn.

The conference began with a ritual to open the gates to all four directions. After that, we sang and danced the Sacred Dance. That was a magical moment in my life, because in that simple dance, a deep connection with the Sacred could be felt, a connection that I had previously felt only in a Rosicrucian Lodge Convocation. That night, in my sleep, my dreams were of dance. After that experience, I became a practitioner of the Sacred Dance.

In 1996, with a Brazilian group of sacred dancers, I visited Findhorn to take part in the “Sacred Dance—20th Year Festival.” Then, I began teaching Sacred Dance. And in almost all those occasions, the dancers—sometimes crying,

sometimes laughing—reported some kind of connection with the Sacred.

In 1997, that enthusiastic group of sacred dancers and I published the first Brazilian book on this subject: *The Sacred Circle Dance as a Tool for Educational and Healing Works*. At that time, sometimes we named the dances “Sacred Dances” and sometimes “Circle Dances.” I taught those dances in schools, in business meetings as a warm-up activity, and at Human Resource Conferences. In many of these gatherings, people reported some kind of connection with the Sacred. After that, in 2000, I decided to study those dances deeply and earn a Master’s degree in “Science of Religion” at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica (PUC-SP) in São Paulo, Brazil. This article is a part of the research carried out for that degree.

The Primal Dance: A Gateway to Other Levels of Reality

Thinking about the dance brings an oncoming sensation of acquaintance, because even those who have never danced in their lives know exactly what dancing is. Among the arts, singing and dancing are the only ones that do not need tools, except the body. “Singing and Dancing are the most ancient species of art every human being has inside them.”¹ Dancing is movement. It is also harmony in a cycle, in a circuit, in a circle.

The most ancient document about dancing refers to the late Paleolithic era and belongs to the cave paintings in the Gabillou Cave, in Dordogne, France. It is called “The Dancer” and consists of “a shamanic figure in dynamic movement. In addition, on the clay floor of one of the caves, the discoverers found footprints in a circular arrangement suggesting that its inhabitants conducted dance.”²

Human beings have danced since the beginning of time. The first type of Circle Dance was without hand contact

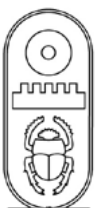
and probably emulating some animal movements or perhaps the movement of the stars in the sky. These forms of dance occurred from 350,000 BCE to 75,000 BCE. Dancing is one of the first creative and symbolic acts that humans have ever produced. According to certain myths, dancing is older than culture, and even older than the myth itself, because the Cosmic was created through dancing.

Maria Gabriele Wosien wrote:

Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, sends pulsating waves of awakening sound through matter, thereby seducing it to life from lethargy. And matter dances, appearing round about him as an aureole of fiery emanations. Dancing, he creates and sustains the manifold phenomena of the universe; dancing, he destroys by fire all forms and names and gives new rest: his dance form is everywhere, all-pervading. Everywhere, Shiva’s gracious dance is made manifest. He dances with Water, Fire, Wind, and Ether. Thus, our Lord always dances in the court.³



“The Dancer” in Gabillou Cave, France.⁴





Guarani women in Paraguay singing.

The Greek myth of Gaian creation began with an image of the deity whirling out of darkness, wrapped in flowing white veils. The ancient Greek word *khaos* first denoted nothingness, the great void before there was anything material in the universe. There was nothingness, as nothing had been formed, yet the dance of energy that would create order or patterns had begun. Everything on the surface of Earth—oceans and rivers, mountains and fertile fields, forests and flowers, creatures that float or fly or crawl or climb, everything—a planet that covered itself in seas as we have seen and is now ready to go on with its dance of life.⁵

In the male dance of Shiva or in the female dance of Gaia, the Cosmic Sacred Dance comes to people, showing itself.

In traditional societies like that of Brazilian natives and Africans, it is still possible to find many emulating dances today. The nature of this dance is magical, that is, its aim is to connect the spirit or the soul of the dancer with the soul or the spirit of Nature or, in this case, the animal. The purpose of this shamanic technique is to empower the dancer with the skills of

the animal before hunting it. Dancing this sacred dance allows the dancer to access other levels of reality.

Indeed, to access the soul of the animal is to connect with the sacred. Bartolomeu Meliá wrote: “The Guarani natives do not know any dances or chants that are profane, for dancing, singing, and praying are synonymous. A chant is a chanting prayer, and a dance is a dancing prayer.”⁶ There is a sacred equality in the functions of dancing and chanting. Together, they form an integrate concept called the “Chant-Dance-Prayer.” Kaká Werá Jecupé wrote:

There is an understanding that the Universal Soul is the same as music: a sacred speech (*nêmporã*) manifested in the human body that is like a flute (*umbau*), a vehicle through which the ‘being-light-sound-music’—or human soul (*avá*)—expresses itself. This flute (the human body) is made out of four little souls (*angás-mirins*): earth, air, water, and fire. They need to be in tune to express the “avá” to support all the body being. It is because of this that dance (*jeroky*) was created: to put all those little souls in tune.⁷

Thus, dance, continuing since the beginning of time as an art that needed just one element—the body—allows people to have the perception, the sense of inner and outer movement, and thus consciousness of their surrounding reality.

The Sacred (or the Holy) as Numinous

It is difficult to talk about the sacred (or the holy), because just as when talking about dancing, there is for some people a déjà vu sensation in it.⁸

When the Portuguese fleet arrived at the Brazilian coast at the beginning of 1500, the first idea the Portuguese had was to celebrate a Catholic mass. Of course, the natives did not speak any

Portuguese and had never taken part in a mass before, but they could feel that that was a sacred moment. This can be read in Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter to the king of Portugal—a letter known in Brazilian history as “Brazil's Birth Certificate.” In that document, we can read the following about the first mass held in Brazil: “The natives were singing and dancing loudly on the beach, with their bows and arrows, when we began the mass. At that moment, they stopped and sat down. After the mass finished, they began again their babel of noise.”⁹

Every culture has a word to refer to the “sacred” as a supernatural source inhabiting the world. In Polynesian and Melanesian cultures, the word is *mana*. For Native Americans—specifically the Iroquois people—the word is *orenda*. For the Guarani people from South America, it is *nbanderu*. In Western societies, the etymology of this word comes from the Latin word *sacer*, meaning “dedicated,” or “holy.”¹⁰ Another meaning could be found in the Etruscan word *sac* meaning “carrying out a sacred act.”¹¹ Mircea Eliade wrote: “‘Sacred’ does not imply any belief in the Divine, deities, or spirits. It is the experience of reality and the source of a conscientiousness of existing in the world.”¹²

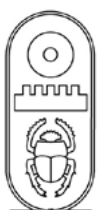
According to Rudolf Otto,¹³ the holy is a complex category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religious or mystic phenomena. Melissa Raphael wrote: “Otto argues that the essential nature of religion is not thinking about the Divine, but a feeling; and the object of that feeling is not called ‘God’ [‘the Divine’] but ‘the Holy.’”¹⁴ Thus, though a *sui generis* aspect, it contains a quite specific element or moment, which sets it apart from the rational.

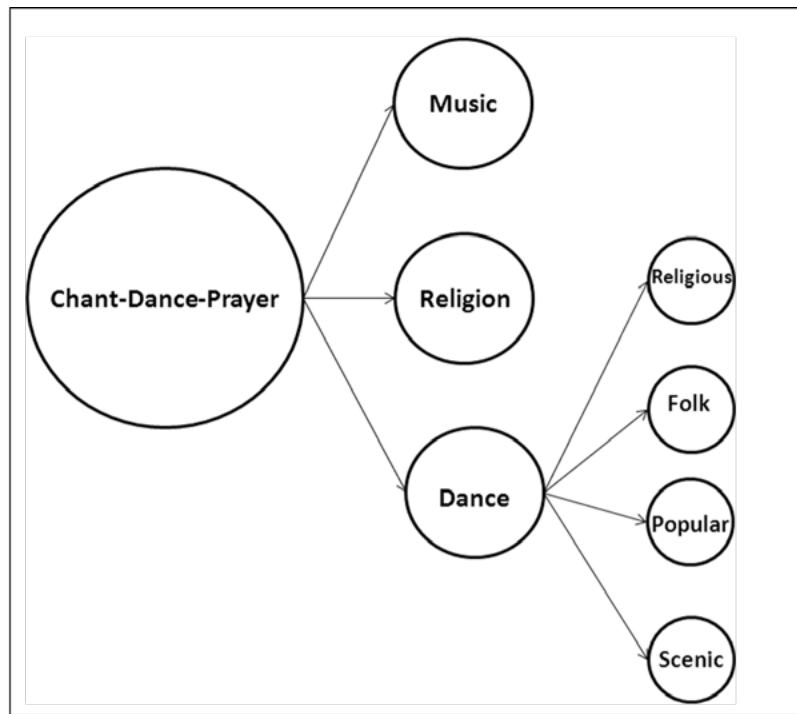
To rescue what he considered to be the original meaning of “the Sacred” as an aspect of the real, Otto adopted a new word coined from the Latin word *numen*, “a deity” or “localized power.”¹⁵ The word is *numinous*. The ontological point of view of the numinous is described by him in detail and is associated with many psychological elements.

After qualifying the sacred as numinous, Otto described the primal feelings associated with it. Basically, there are two kinds of feelings associated with the numinous. They are the feelings of repulsion and attraction. These two feelings create a “gravitational field” around the sacred, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, that is, the fundamental element that keeps religion alive. This mystery actualizes the



The Kecak dance in Bali, Indonesia.





The specialization of dance in Western society.

emotional potential of the human being producing a state of transcendence, with reflections in the body and in the soul, and this can be felt in the dance.

The Circle Dance as a Concept of Dancing

In Western society, even the written form of the word *dance* is similar in different languages. In Portuguese, it is *dança*, in French *danse*, in Spanish *danza*, in Italian *danze*, and in German *tanze*. With the specialization that occurred, the concept of the Chant-Dance-Prayer was disintegrated in at least three specific areas: the Music, the Religion, and, of course, the Dance. The Dance itself could be divided yet in scenic dance, popular dance, folk dance, and religious dance.

Ballet is one of the most well-known scenic dances. It involves strong bodywork to take the dancers to the limit of their technique of movement and strength. The aim of popular dance is to have fun; today, ballroom dancing has many competitive levels. Folk dance usually aims to preserve the culture, or some part of it. In Brazil,

some native groups that lost their religion to Christianity perform certain folk dances in order to preserve a part of their culture. It is quite common to find some folk groups outside of their original region. In Canada, for example, some Celtic dances were very well preserved. The religious dances are connected with some aspect of religion or mystical practice, for example, Sufi dance. The Circle Dance is still classified as a popular dance in Eastern Europe. In some Balkan countries, for example, this is absolutely true.

It is a very common argument that “dance is a language of gestures.” However, dancing is also a dance of encountering, when people can meet one another. This is the basis of the sense of community and a very important one. In circle dancing, people usually stay connected by their hands and they make eye contact. This way the individual is connected in a group. Thus, the circle is more than a form or a kind of dance; it is a concept of dancing. For example, the military march is a kind of Circle Dance, but it does not have a

circular form. We can find Circle Dance in a spiral form, a line form, and so on.

As a concept of dancing, the Circle Dance has a metaphorical sense. First, it is an attempt to reconnect with the primal concept of dance, the Chant-Dance-Prayer. Second, it reflects a kind of dance that brings to the dancers and to the group a strong sense of inner connection and/or cooperation. Besides its aims to be integral, the Circle Dance has three aspects: cultural, spiritual, and health. Regarding these aspects, in my research, I was able to find this conception of dance in four movements:

- a. The Folk Dance—as an attempt to preserve a particular culture;
- b. The Biodance—from the Chilean psychiatrist Rolando Toro Araneda (1924–2010), as an attempt to preserve or recover both mental and physical health;
- c. The Dance of Universal Peace—from the American mystic Samuel Lewis (1896–1971), as an attempt

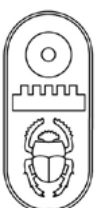
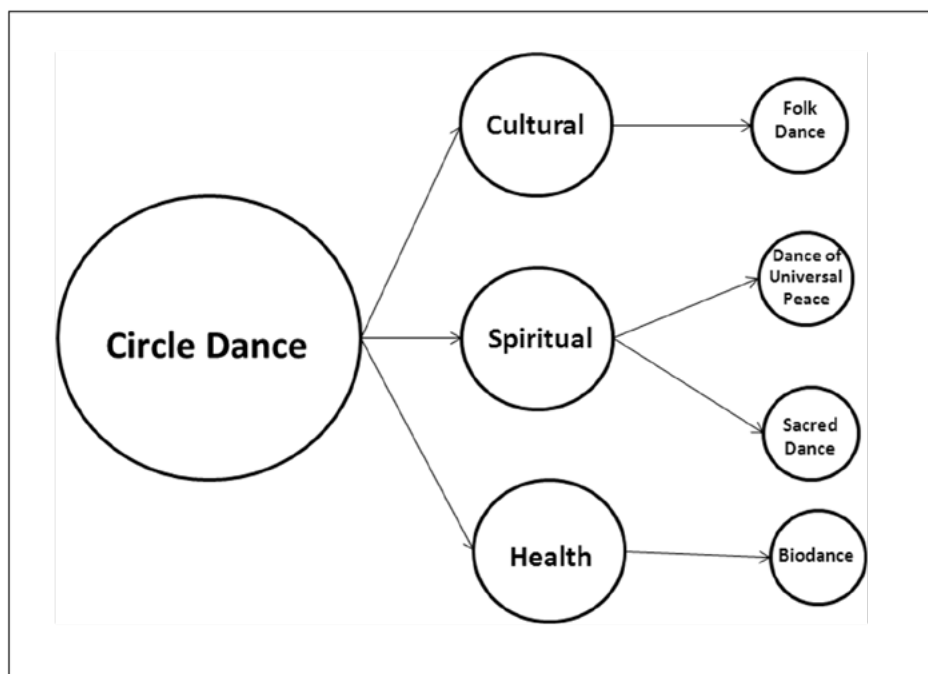
to establish a spiritual connection with the Sacred;

- d. The Sacred Dance—from the German dancer Bernhard Wosien (1908–1986), and the Scottish Spiritual Community of Findhorn, also as an attempt to establish a spiritual connection.

As we can see, it is the spiritual dimension of Circle Dance that interests us. This dimension is deeply connected with the New Age Movement that is a part of Western esotericism.

The Sacred Dance Movement

Bernhard Wosien, the son of a priest, Louis Wosien, and the Baroness of Buttler-Ponarth, Antionett-Linda, was born and brought up in Masuen, East Prussia, during the period marked by the end of the German Empire and the beginning of the Republic. He lived in one of the most bewildering periods of German history and even of humankind: during the First and the Second World Wars.





A postcard from Skopje, Macedonia, from the 1930s showing a Kolo dance.

At that time, he was supposed to begin his university studies, however he took up both ballet in the Breslau Opera House and theology at the University of Breslau instead. His family was very unhappy with his choice. Thus, as a compromise for this family conflict, he traded those studies for an initiation in the Art Academy of Breslau to become an artist. However, this never happened because this project was stopped by the Nazis. Thus, he went back to ballet and, in 1939, he was the first dancer in the Berlin Theatre.¹⁶

In Dresden, in the early 1950s, he discovered the potential of folk dance when he watched a performance of a Yugoslavian folk dance group called Kolo. He said: "They are an enthusiastic group completely connected to one another by joy, love, and happiness. What I saw there was the strong power of Circle Dance."¹⁷ After that, Wosien got involved with many folk dance groups in Serbia and Greece. Wosien said: "In that ancient form of folk dance, I found the path to silence with meditative dance."¹⁸ Time passed and Wosien began to collect some folk dance choreographies under the name of Heilige Tänze. He said: "In German, *heilige* means 'holy' or 'sacred'; it also has connotations of healing and wholeness. The English

translation of sacred is inadequate and we have no single word to cover the multiplicity of meaning of the German word."¹⁹

In 1975, Bernhard and his daughter Marie-Gabriele Wosien met Peter and Eileen Caddy, the founders of Findhorn Community in Tanus, close to Frankfurt. Marie-Gabriele Wosien said: "The moment was magical. We were in a special place. My mother and some friends were also there. It was a meeting with a strong spiritual power. We danced, sang, and prayed and exchanged many ideas. It was then that Peter and my father met and began to make plans together."²⁰

The Findhorn Community was founded in 1962 by Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean. All three had followed disciplined spiritual paths for many years. They first came to northeast Scotland in 1957 to manage the Cluny Hill Hotel in the town of Forres, which they did remarkably successfully. Eileen received guidance in her meditations from an inner divine source she called "the still, small voice within," and Peter ran the hotel according to this guidance and his own intuition. In this unorthodox way—and with many delightful and unlikely incidents—Cluny Hill swiftly became a

thriving and successful four-star hotel. After several years, however, Peter's and Eileen's employment was terminated, and with nowhere to go and little money, they moved with their three young sons and Dorothy to a caravan in the nearby seaside village of Findhorn. Feeding six people on unemployment benefits was difficult, so Peter decided to start growing vegetables. The land in the caravan park was sandy and dry but he persevered. Dorothy discovered she was able to intuitively contact the overlighting spirits of plants—which she called angels, and then devas—who gave her instructions on how to make the most of their fledgling garden. She and Peter translated this guidance into action with amazing results. From the barren, sandy soil of the Findhorn Bay Caravan Park grew huge plants, herbs, and flowers of dozens of kinds, most famously the now-legendary forty-pound cabbages. Word spread, horticultural experts came and were stunned, and the garden at Findhorn became famous.²¹

In the fall of 1969, after a BBC program about the community, six hundred people visited the place and, in a short time, two

hundred people were living in Findhorn as resident guests.

In 1976, Bernhard Wosien introduced to Findhorn his Heilige Tänze, “Dance Meditation,” as well as traditional European folk dances. Like people who lived there, he felt committed to the ideals of “One Earth” and “One Humanity.” Under a New Age spirit, the community grows.²²

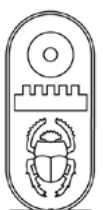
In 1997, the community was accepted as a member of the UNESCO Planet Society Network. Every year, in July, the community holds its Sacred Dance Festival, “bringing together traditional dances from around the world and contemporary choreographies, focusing on both the individual and group experiences.”²³

Sacred Dance Dimension in Brazilian Culture

Although Findhorn is an important international center of Sacred Dance, there are no rules on this, which is a very common characteristic of the New Age Movement. To understand the Sacred Dance dimension in the Brazilian culture, a survey was conducted with the first



Findhorn community members perform a sacred circle dance in 2019. Photo courtesy of Peter Vallance.





Samba de Roda in Cachoeira, Brazil.

Brazilians facilitators²⁴ who worked in nine state capitals.

As a result, it was possible to know that the Brazilians understand that, to be a facilitator in Sacred Dance, the person must be able to care for both the dance and the dancers. They have to facilitate the connection with the sacred.

There is complex inner work prior to beginning a group session of dance. Some people meditate and some attune with higher energies asking for inspiration; others only observe silence. The preparation of the environment is another important point. Not only is cleansing the mental field very important but also the physical one. If it is possible, they set a central point with some flowers and a lit candle. Incense may be used as well.

One session of dance has three moments: (a) an overture with some kind of attunement with higher energies and the master within the dancers; (b) a session of dance itself; and (c) closure with a sharing moment between the dancers, or just a prayer of thanks.

Each facilitator has his or her own collection of dances; some traditional, and some contemporary. It depends on their background. Some sing and play, while

others use only recorded music. The way dances are taught is very diverse as well.

Today, the Sacred Dance Movement is very strong in many countries. Bernard Wosien died in 1986, but his daughter Marie-Gabriele is still researching and teaching Heilige Tänze (Sacred Dances) across the world. The Findhorn Community is still promoting its Sacred Dance Festival and training people from different nations. Thus, as a movement, Sacred Dance is practiced today in many countries around the world and in different situations in schools and business. Since 2002, Brazil has had a National Festival of Sacred Circle Dance that is held in São Paulo. This is a prime example of how an esoteric practice hidden in plain sight has impacted our world for the better.

***Note:** This article was written with information contained in my M.A. Dissertation in Science of Religion, The Sacred Circle Dance and The Sacred: An exploratory study about the historical and practical dimension of New Age movement and the search for its numinous and hierophanic aspects, Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC-SP), Brazil (2002).*

Endnotes

¹ Maribel Portinari, *História da Dança* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1989), 11.

² Stanislav Grof, *The Cosmic Game: Exploration of the frontier of the human consciousness* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1998), 258.

- ³ Maria Gabriele Wosien, *Danças Sagradas: El Encuentro con los Dioses* (Madrid: Debate, 1996), 7.
- ⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Way of the Animal Powers* (Harper and Row, 1989); Apud Stanislav Grof, *The Cosmic Game: Exploration of the frontier of the human consciousness* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1998), 258.
- ⁵ Elisabeth Sathouris, *Gaia do Caos ao Cósmico*. (São Paulo: Integração, 1991), 21–22.
- ⁶ Bartolomeu Meliá, “A Experiência Religiosa Guarani” (In MARZAL, Manuel org. 1989), 318–319.
- ⁷ Kaká Werá Jecupé, *A Terra dos Mil Povos* (São Paulo: Fundação Peirópolis, 1998), 24.
- ⁸ Unlike German and Portuguese, English has two words to express this concept (or idea): *holy* and *sacred*. *Holy* could be understood as a participant religious term, while *sacred* will be regarded as a phenomenological term that can be used descriptively by those outside a given religious community as well as confessionally. *Holy* comes from the Old English *hālig*, where *hāl* means “whole.” However, since this study was first written in Portuguese, I will use the word *sacred* instead of *holy* to express the idea of holiness. {See Oxtoby’s discussion of this issue, “Holy, Idea of the,” 434–6. See also idem, “Holy [the Sacred], in P. Wiener (ed), *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, C Scribner’s Sons,” 1973), 511f.; Davies, *Every Day God*, 123–6, ROR 8i, P. S. Minear, “The Holy and the Sacred,” *Theology Today*, 47 (1990), 5–7, H. W. Turner, Rudolf Otto; *The Idea of the Holy* (Aberdeen: H.W. Turner, 1974), 9. In Melissa Raphael, *Rudolf Otto and the Concept of Holiness* (N.Y: Oxford, 1997) 26.
- ⁹ José Augusto Valente, *A Certidão de Nascimento do Brasil: A Carta de Caminha*. (SP, Ed. Fundo de Pesquisa do Museu Paulista da USP, 1975), 5.
- ¹⁰ Bassarab Nicolescu, *Manifesto da Transdisciplinaridade* (São Paulo: Triom, 1999), 127.
- ¹¹ José Mardones, *As Nova Formas de Religião* (Coimbra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1996), 21.
- ¹² Mircea Eliade in Bassarab Nicolescu, “Levels of Reality and Sacred” (International Conference Foundation of the Ontological Quest: Prospect to the New Millennium, (Vatican: Pontificias Universitas Lateraneanis, January, 2002).
- ¹³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of Holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the Divine* (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1926).
- ¹⁴ Melissa Raphael (1997), Op. cit. 61.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Bernhard Wosien, *Dança: Um Caminho para a Totalidade* (São Paulo: Triom, 2000).
- ¹⁷ Bernhard Wosien (2000), Op. cit. 106.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, Op. cit. 117.
- ¹⁹ Lynn Frances and Richard Bryant-Jefferies, *The Sevenfold Circle: Selfawareness in dance* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 1998) 40.
- ²⁰ Unpublished Interview conducted by the author with Marie-Gabriele Wosien in August 2001.
- ²¹ Findhorn Foundation (<https://www.findhorn.org/history>).
- ²² Marie-Gabriele Wosien. (http://www.sacreddance-wosien.net/Sacred-Dance/sacred_dance.html).
- ²³ Findhorn Foundation, Sacred Dance Festival <https://findhornsacreddance.com/>.
- ²⁴ According to Alex Walker in his book talking about Findhorn, focalizer is not the same as a leader, in a sense, that is someone who gives orders, but is a respected person who is able to be attuned with the necessity of all. Alex Walker, *A Verdade Interior* (Sao Paulo: Triom, 1998) 169. English version *The Kingdom Within*, (Findhorn Press, 1994).



Native American children dancing in a circle.

