

ECSTATIC TRANCE

By Linda Costello

Introduction

My interest in Ecstatic Trance came about by personal experience. In the early 1990's, I began to spontaneously experience awarenesses of otherworldly beings. These beings would explain things to me from a greater perspective, and I began to gain much clarity about patterns in my life. During these times of communion, I would often be completely unaware of my current surroundings. The more these instances continued, I found myself being able to know other people's thoughts and feelings. At the time I was studying Counseling/Psychology, and began to worry that I was in some sort of psychosis, so I began to research more about the experiences I was having. I found out that others had experienced the same or similar phenomena, which led to my learning about Ecstatic Trance. I realized that my experiences fit the definition.

What is Ecstatic Trance?

So what is Ecstatic Trance? Let's start with defining the individual terms.

The word, Ecstasy, has its roots in Greek, *ec stasis* – to be outside oneself.¹ Ecstasy is a category of trance or trancelike states in which an individual transcends ordinary consciousness and as a result has a heightened capacity for exceptional thought or experience. These may include profound emotional feelings, intense concentration on a specific task, extraordinary physical abilities, and especially awareness of non-ordinary mental spaces. This last is often referred to as religious ecstasy.

The word, Trance, has its roots in Latin, *transir* – to go over or across, and from Old French, *transe* – passage, fear, vision.² A trance is a hypnotic, cataleptic, or ecstatic state, detachment from one's physical surroundings, and/or a semiconscious state, as between sleeping and waking. Basically, trance is an altered state of consciousness.

Thus, Ecstatic Trance is an altered state of consciousness that results in heightened awareness outside of oneself; one could say, a passage or journey into non-ordinary reality.

The Trance State

Scientists have identified four different states of consciousness and define each state by the number of brain waves emitted. Depending upon activity in the mind, our brains emit electrochemical impulses of various frequencies.

The most rapid of these is known as Beta. They range from 13 – 60 pulses per second and are identified when we are fully alert or when we feel agitated, tense, or afraid.

When we are in a state of physical and mental relaxation, our brain waves pulse to the beat of 7 – 13 pulses per second. We are aware of our physical surroundings, but are not focusing our attention there. This is known as the Alpha state, and is a very suggestible state.

When the brain wave impulses slow to 4-7 pulses per second, we are in the Theta state. This is a light sleep state, where we are no longer conscious of the physical world.

The deepest state is the state of Delta, when our brain waves pulsate at a rate of 0.1 - 4 pulses per second. We are in a complete unconscious state.

Neuroscientists claim that when people are in the alpha state, significant levels of beta-endorphin, noro-epinephrine, and dopamine are produced, all of which are linked to a feeling of well being and acute mental clarity. Relaxation and meditation aid the practitioner in achieving this state.³

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org>

² <http://dictionary.reference.com>

³ Dr. Hugo Heyrman, Museums of the Mind, See <http://www.doctorhugo.org/brainwaves/brainwaves.html>

These particular states can be induced through the use of patterning, or creating an outer impulse that matches the brain wave impulses of the desired state. Most “shamanic” or trance-inducing drumming is at a rhythm of 4.5 beats per second, which corresponds to the theta state, and thus the practitioner enters into a trance. The rhythmic drone of Tibetan Chants is at the same rhythm and transports the monks to a state of bliss.

Theta brings forth heightened receptivity, inspiration, flashes of dreamlike imagery, and is often considered the gateway to learning and memory. Being in this state increases creativity, enhances learning, reduces stress, and awakens the intuition as well as extra sensory perception.⁴

Core Concepts

One of the methods I used to study what I am calling Ecstatic Trance is through the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, founded and run by Michael Harner. I attended several weekend and week-long courses, and learned much about and experienced the state of ecstatic trance of which I now write.

Harner believes that our ancient ancestors all over the world knew how to maximize human abilities of mind and spirit for healing and problem solving. He calls the methods employed, “shamanism,” a term that comes from a Siberian tribal word for practitioners of this kind of work: ‘shaman’ (pronounced SHAH-mahn). Shamans use a technique known as journeying to access hidden worlds which are usually known through myth, dream, and near-death experiences.⁵

After years of study, Harner and his colleagues produced what he calls “core shamanism,” devoid of culture, and based upon the elements that they found in common throughout the many tribal cultures that they studied. He claims that the teaching and use of the basic principles and practices of core shamanism have encouraged a rapid revival of shamanic healing practices in the West and elsewhere. He purposefully chose not to imitate any specific cultural tradition, but rather trains his students in underlying cross-cultural principles. He feels that this is especially suited for Westerners who can adopt and integrate a system into their contemporary lives.⁶ This idea appeals to me, as I would like to develop a “shamanism” or more accurately, a system of Ecstatic Trance, geared for those who follow Indo-European paths, and specifically for my personal Celtic hearth culture.

Mircea Eliade did a similar cross-cultural comparison of common elements which he presented in his book called “Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy.”⁷ Combining information gathered by Eliade with the work of Harner, some of the common elements that are found across cultures include:

- Belief in three distinct worlds of being, usually given as above, middle, and below.
- The use of helper spirits or animal allies who assist the shaman in his healing and other tasks.
- The idea of the central axis or world tree that enables the shaman to enter the worlds above or below by climbing into its branches or down into the roots.
- Entry to the underworld by use of a cave, spring or well
- Entry to the upperworld by use of climbing a ladder, a tree, or anything tall, or by flying
- Belief in the ability of the shaman to shape shift to accomplish certain shamanic tasks or receive certain knowledge.
- Belief in communion and conversation with the ancestors.
- Practice of techniques intended to alter the consciousness of the shaman. These techniques may either be through ritual dancing, drumming, music, meditation or through the use of some mind altering substance.
- Belief that the shaman is one with nature and the rest of creation, or is on the path to be so.

⁴ Tools for Wellness; from: <http://www.toolsforwellness.com/brainstates.html>

⁵ Harner, Michael; Way of the Shaman, p. also found at <http://www.shamanism.org/>

⁶ Harner, Michael; see Science, Spirits, and Core Shamanism, in Shamanism, Spring/Summer, Vol 12, #1; also found online at: <http://www.shamanism.org/articles/1027871950.htm>

⁷ Eliade, Mircea, Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, Bollingen Series LXXVI, Princeton University Press, 1964, 1992

Because both Harner and Eliade have studied what they each label as “shamanism” extensively, and their discoveries have been widely disseminated, any sort of ecstatic trance that we hear about these days tends to be referred to as shamanism. So as to avoid the association with Siberian shamanism, I will continue to refer to these practices as Ecstatic Trance for the rest of this article.

Evidence of Ecstatic Trance in Indo-European Cultures

According to Eliade, although trance did not always dominate their tribal spirituality, we can find evidence of many of trance practices among the Indo-European cultures.⁸ Some of the similarities we find with are the three worlds, the World Tree, communion with the ancestors, and most definitely, a oneness with Nature.

Miranda and Stephen Aldhouse-Green, in their work, *The Quest for the Shaman*, focused upon evidence of shape-shifters, sorcerers, and spirit-healers of Ancient Europe. They found both overt and covert reference to gender-switching and shape-changing beings within the mythic literature from early medieval times. Within the literature, there is much evidence of interaction between this world and the Otherworld, especially communion with the dead. Art and artifacts uncovered archeologically seem to substantiate these ideas. One example is the use of cauldrons in so many of the ancient myths, to symbolize entrance to the Otherworld. On the Gundestrup cauldron, we not only have the object at hand, but the iconographic narrative upon it includes a scene where warriors are placed upside down in a vat, seemingly to illustrate a process of rebirth, thus demonstrating a relationship with the land of the dead.⁹

Germanic culture:

From the Germanic culture, we have a perfect example of the core concepts in Odin, known as the Great Magician, who hung from a tree for nine days and nights to glean the meaning of the runes through his dreams and visions. The tree from which he hung is often referred to Yggdrasil, or the Cosmic Tree, and correlates to the idea of a central axis or world tree as referred to in the core concepts. During the time Odin was on the tree, he changed into the shape of many different animals, thus correlative with both shapeshifting and animal allies.

There are also many references to underworld descents in Germanic mythology which parallel the archetypal images of traveling the road of the dead, crossing the river, encountering an obstacle, and overcoming the obstacle in some sort of initiatory moment. We also see the existence of *seidhr*, a means of foreseeing the future by traveling to the underworld.

Greece:

In Ancient Greece, ecstatic trance seems to be related to Apollo. Abaris, a man from the North with a golden arrow, thus marking him as Apollo's, would presumably non-physically travel from land to land, healing the sick and predicting disasters. He would sometimes be depicted as flying through the air on his arrow. Aristeas, another follower of Apollo, was seen in more than one place at the same time. He could also be found in crow form, following Apollo.

In the legend of Epimenides of Crete, the man entered into a trance state in the cave of Zeus on Mount Ida. He learned to journey through many otherworldly lands, healing and prophesying, among other ecstatic practices.

In the story of Orpheus, we find the descent into the lower world (Hades) to bring back the soul of his wife, Eurydice. He was also known for his magical and divinatory skills, and when he was slain, his head continued to sing as it floated away, and later became an oracle.

Central Asia:

In Central Asia, we have the Scythians, Caucasians, and Iranians. The funeral practices of the Scythians indicate a veneration of the ancestors as well as an altering of consciousness to induce trance. The Caucasian people have also preserved many of the traditions of the Scythians, and also demonstrate other

⁸ Eliade, Mircea, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*; p 375-427

⁹ Aldhouse-Green, Miranda and Stephen; *The Quest for the Shaman*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2005

practices that are relative to some of the core concepts of generic shamanism. They have a belief about the deceased crossing a bridge as narrow as a hair, a myth about a Cosmic Tree whose top touches the sky and at whose root there is a spring. There are stories of *messulethe*, a type of psychopomp who escorts the dead to the otherworld.

The Iranian culture has similar views, but tends to focus more on the destiny of the soul, and the crossing of the bridge at death resembles an initiation. The bridge is said to connect earth and heaven at the Center, thus again demonstrating a central axis.

The mystical and ecstatic elements in the spirituality of Zarathustra also correlate to core concepts. These include mystical or symbolical communication between heaven and earth, the bridge connecting the worlds, sacred space, the importance of song, and references to the use of hemp as a means to induce trance. The story of Artay Viraf contains a seven-day trance in which visions, journeys, and references to the underworld and upper world were related. There were also references to shape-shifting among the Turko-Mongols.

India:

In Brahmanic ritual, we find again the ceremonial ascent to the world of the gods. The means by which this is accomplished is the *yupa* – a tree that the priest chooses in the forest and prays in a way that dedicates it to touching the sky, filling the air, and steadying the earth. The Cosmic Pillar has been established, and sacrifices are made to honor the gods. Again, we find evidence of shape shifting and animal allies throughout their practices, as ascents to the upper world, the world of the gods are made. These ascents are usually accompanied by reaching certain levels of ecstatic trance.

The Rg-Veda also presents examples of soul retrieval, a correlation to the concept of our oneness with nature. Trance elements may also be found in Indian beliefs concerning death, and the soul's reunion with the ancestors (*pitaras*).

In the aboriginal Orissan tribe in India, we find “initiatory marriages,” or marriages with otherworldly beings. This is a very real part of their lives, and it is common for them to relate their dreams involving tutelaries (spirit allies) as objective reality, and part of the supernatural election of their tribal healers. Initiations often involve common elements of crossing bridges. Trance is also induced using rice shaken in a winnow to a repetitive beat, similar to a drumbeat.

Celtic:

Folks involved in the Celtic Reconstructionist movement (CR) spend much of their time researching texts, learning languages, meditating and doing spirit journey work, and basically gathering enough material to create the groundwork for a modern Celtic tradition that respects the ancient sources, as well as rejecting those parts of ancient worship that are not appropriate for this day and age.

Within their research, the CRs have identified the cosmos in terms of three realms of Land, Sea, and Sky, which are often correlated with the underworld, middle world, and upper world. A tree, or world tree, is seen as the center of the cosmos. Fire plays a pivotal role in the culture, and often a symbol of fire on water would indicate divine inspiration, and sometimes can be seen as a substitute for the world tree as the pivotal center.¹⁰ These directly relate to some of the common elements that Harner and Eliade have identified.

In my research for evidence of ecstatic trance in the Celtic culture, I have uncovered much. Since my hearth culture is Celtic, this is the arena in which I have concentrated most of my studies.

The most well-known form of trancework that we find in Celtic history is the ceremony of the *Tarbh Fheis* – The Bull Feast. A bull was slaughtered, and the celebrants would eat of the bull's meat. After they feasted, a druid would wrap himself in the bull hide and other druids would rhythmically chant to aid the

¹⁰ The CR Essay Collective, Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism:
http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=uswa&c=trads&id=6645

journeyer in entering into a trance state, usually to “see” in a dream state who the next king of the land would be.

Another example of ecstatic trance is found in the “fili” or sacred poet. According to Erynn Rowan Laurie, one of the leaders in the CR movement, a fili is a sacred ecstatic poet.¹¹ She goes on to talk about the fact that filidh go through at least eight, and possibly up to twenty years of training in formal schools. Nora K. Chadwick from Oxford University makes a similar reference in her *Scottish Gaelic Studies*,¹² and goes on to explain about the different grades of fili. Laurie has listed them in Gaelic with her own translation into English as follows:

foclo/c [novice], macfuirmid [son of composition?], doss [bushy tree, shelterer?], cano [cub or whelp], cli/ or druimcli/ [ridgepole, roof-tree], anrad or ansru/ith [great stream], and ollamh. The highest rank of any craftsman or scholar was also called ollamh. [great high one]”¹³

The filidh, like the fa/ith (prophets and seers), use poetic tools to induce visions, one of which is known as the imbas forosnai.¹⁴ Chadwick includes a translation in her *Scottish Gaelic Studies* that discusses the process of entering into the trance state as well as the origin of the term “Imbas.” A paragraph from that work follows:

“Imbas Forosna, 'Manifestation that enlightens': (it) discovers what thing soever the poet likes and which he desires to reveal. Thus then is that done. The poet chews a piece of the red flesh of a pig, or a dog, or a cat, and puts it then on a flagstone behind the door-valve, and chants an incantation over it, and offers it to idol gods, and calls them to him, and leaves them not on the morrow, and then chants over his two palms, and calls again idol gods to him, that his sleep may not be disturbed. Then he puts his two palms on his two cheeks and sleeps.” And men are watching him that he may not turn over and that no one may disturb him. And then it is revealed to him that for which he was (engaged) till the end of a nómad (three days and nights), or two or three for the long or the short (time?) that he may judge himself (to be) at the offering. And therefore it is called Imm-bas, to wit, a palm (bas) on this side and a palm on that around his head.”¹⁵

Imbas is maybe more accurately translated as poetic ecstasy, as it is a state that takes one out of oneself. According to Laurie, Imbas is the single most sought-after trait in Celtic mythology, with the possible exception of prowess in battle.¹⁶

Many techniques are used to achieve trance states, and research into ancient Celtic culture continues to uncover possibilities.

Recently, sweat houses have been discovered around Ireland. Irish sweat houses are small structures, made out of field stones, and looking like beehives. They had a small crawl space for a doorway, and venting to allow smoke out. It appears that fires were made in them, as soot has been found on the ceilings of some of them.

According to Reverend Robert Gage of Rathlin Island, the sweat houses were used as a sweat cure for healing the ill.¹⁷ There is also some proof that they were used to help clear complexions. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that they were used for trance, beyond the idea that they were purported to be used

¹¹ Laurie, Erynn, <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/erynn-words.html>

¹² Chadwick, Nora K, *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, Vol 4, part 2, Oxford University Press, 1935; also found online at: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/4715/imbassforosnai.html>

¹³ Laurie, Erynn, <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/erynn-words.html>

¹⁴ Laurie, Erynn, <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/erynn-words.html>

¹⁵ Chadwick, Nora K, *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, Vol 4, part 2, Oxford University Press, 1935; also found online at: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/4715/imbassforosnai.html>

¹⁶ Laurie, Erynn, <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/erynn-words.html>

¹⁷ Gage: *A History of the Island of Rathlin*, 1851; referenced online at: <http://www.irishmegaliths.org.uk/sweathouses.htm>

mostly around Samhain, which is also the time when psychotropic mushrooms tend to appear in many fields around the country.¹⁸ Some believe that there is a connection.

There is continued research being done by members of the CR movement, and currently efforts are underway to construct a sweat house based upon evidence uncovered about ancient customs, and similarly, rituals to be used in the sweat house ceremonies are being developed that would be in alignment with what is known of the ancient ways.

How to Recognize Ecstatic Trance

One of the questions that may arise is how to recognize ecstatic trance when you are in it. What does it feel like? What characterizes that particular state of consciousness?

I can only speak from experience when I describe what it feels like to me, but the best explanation I can give is that it feels as though what is normally thought of as imagination or dreams, which is usually secondary to physical, every day reality, suddenly shifts to be the reality upon which I put my attention. This state is sometimes called non-ordinary reality, and is usually described as a change in one's point of reference.

Ways of Entering into Ecstatic Trance

I have already discussed the use of a percussive sound made at the rate of 4.5 pulses per second which would entrain our brain waves to a similar pulsation. There are also other ways to induce the trance state.

For example, one can use a repetitive dance step to induce trance. Anything that puts the mind on automatic can be successful. In many cultures such as the Bushmen of the Kalahari, we can find techniques of trance dancing, which elevate them into ecstatic, altered states of consciousness.¹⁹ In 1991, in one of the holistic psychology classes I took at Lesley College, Cambridge, MA, I participated in a circle dance that was specifically geared towards inducing such trance.

Another example is the use of toning or chanting to induce heightened states of awareness and ecstatic trance. Chanting can be used in the same way as drumming, by producing a hypnotic rhythm that coincides with the rate of brain wave impulses most conducive for ecstatic trance.

Fascinating work is being done by Felicitas D. Goodman and Nana Nawnaud wherein certain body postures are utilized to enter into Ecstatic Trance. Goodman is an anthropologist and a highly regarded expert in linguistics. She has researched over seventy ritual postures, which, when combined with a rhythmic stimulation of the nervous system, will move a person beyond the limits of ordinary perception and self-definition. Goodman claims that any ecstatic trance experience will increase one's well-being, physically and psychologically.²⁰

Another ceremony that has been adapted to our Western culture is the use of sensory deprivation to attain an ecstatic state of consciousness. Just as the ancient Celts would wrap themselves in a bull hide, so can we use something as simple as plastic wrap to confine our bodies in such a way as to let our spirits roam free within a state of trance. While in this state of receptivity, I have personally received messages from my own patron gods and goddesses, as well as valuable insights and wisdoms that came through.

There are also more intense ways of entering into the trance state. In 1979, a new term was coined by Fakir Musafar, called "Modern Primitive." He uses this term to describe some of the spiritual practices of body modification found in various cultures, which he has adapted to our Western culture. Various techniques

¹⁸ From: <http://www.merlinswisdom.co.uk/sweatarticle.html>

¹⁹ Harkless, Steve; Trance, Dance and Ecstasy; from: http://harkless.org/steve/writing/Trance_Dance_and_Ecstasy.html

²⁰ Goodman, Felicitas D; Where the Spirits Ride the Wind; Indiana University Press, 1990; also online at <http://www.ritualbodypostures.com>

are utilized to expand boundaries, shift consciousness, and induce visions, all of which lead to personal healings and transformation.²¹

Several years ago, I participated in one of Musafar's workshops based upon the Hindu Ball Dance, a sacred ceremony from the Savite Hindu Culture, where round objects were tied onto the body by way of piercings. The celebrant would then dance around with these objects pulling on the skin until they began to enter an altered state of consciousness – ecstatic trance. There were several of us at the workshop who participated in learning about the practices, the techniques, and finally participated in the “dance.” I saw and heard many wondrous events during this experience. For myself, I entered into a heightened state of consciousness that could only be described as euphoric. I felt as though the spirit of the event was dancing me and I was transported to a place where I could view the event from a higher perspective. I danced for about four hours, never once feeling tired. Most notably for me, I felt myself joined, merged, with the dancers around me. One woman had a vision of her late daughter that totally transformed her grief into a faith in life after death. Others reported similarly remarkable experiences. There are many such stories of utilizing body stress techniques to attain heightened spiritual awareness and experiences.

Specific Practices

How do we apply what we know about ecstatic trance to our current day meditation practice? I have employed many methods of using Ecstatic Trance in my meditations. Here are some suggestions that can be tried.

One way is to make a recording of a steady drumbeat of approximately 4.5 beats per second or to order one ready-made. I would suggest that you start out with a five to ten minute recording of the steady beat. It's a good idea to also have a closing to help bring you back to waking consciousness. I suggest stopping the steady beat, beating out three beats of three, and then a rapid beat that is approximately three or more times faster than the original beat which plays for two or three minutes, then finalize with a final three beats, three times. As you become more proficient with entering into the altered state of consciousness, you can prolong the amount of time with the steady beat.

Another option is to develop a rhythmical chant, such as “By our Will, by our Word, by our Works, this grove is made whole and holy.” Repeat this over and over and over until it becomes automatic, and you lose awareness of your physical surroundings. Once you are in an altered state, you are free to explore these realms, and often no longer need to repeat the words. It's a good idea to set some sort of timer to alert you when it is time to come back to waking consciousness. This can also be achieved by setting an intention for the journey to only last for a certain period of time. Again, as you become more facile at this process, you can expand the length of time in which you journey.

Utilizing sacred positions to facilitate the state of ecstatic trance is yet another method. Most of my thirty years of meditation practice has taken place in one of two positions. One is called the God position, or the King position, and is the one I most often use. Basically it is a position of sitting on a chair with spine straight, feet flat on the ground, and hands resting on the arms of the chair or on one's knees. This allows one to remain alert enough to be aware of subtle changes in consciousness without having to attend to the body.

The second position I have used is called the Corpse position. In this position, one lies flat on one's back, feet together, and hands at the side of the body. This is extremely useful for longer or deeper trance journeys, so that there is no danger of falling over, or cutting off circulation. The biggest danger is falling asleep and missing the journey.

Experimenting with other sacred postures can yield different results. Be creative and especially, enjoy the journey.

²¹ Musafar, Fakir; About Fakir; from: <http://www.bodyplay.com/>

Conclusion

Ecstatic Trance has been around for as long as we have historical records, and it is here to stay. I hope, after reading this article, that you have gleaned some insights into this process, and can start to incorporate various practices into your ceremonies and meditations, and indeed, into the heartbeat of Neo-Druidry.

Here is a short recommended reading list for those who want to explore more deeply.

Ecstatic Trance: New Ritual Body Postures, by Felicitas D. Goodman and Nana Nauwald
Where the Spirits Ride the Wind, by Felicitas D. Goodman
Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, by Mircea Eliade
The Quest for the Shaman, by Miranda and Stephen Aldhouse-Green
Way of the Shaman, by Michael Harner

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¹ Harner, Michael; Way of the Shaman, also found at <http://www.shamanism.org/>

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¹ The CR Essay Collective, Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism:

http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=uswa&c=trads&id=6645

¹ Laurie, Erynn, <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/erynn-words.html>

¹ Chadwick, Nora K, Scottish Gaelic Studies, Vol 4, part 2, Oxford University Press, 1935; also found online at: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/4715/imbasforosnai.html>

¹ Laurie, Erynn, <http://www.druidry.org/obod/theorder/archive/erynn-words.html>

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¹ Chadwick, Nora K, Scottish Gaelic Studies, Vol 4, part 2, Oxford University Press, 1935; also found online at: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/4715/imbasforosnai.html>

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¹ Gage: A History of the Island of Rathlin, 1851; referenced online at:

<http://www.irishmegaliths.org.uk/sweathouses.htm>

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¹ Harkless, Steve; Trance, Dance and Ecstasy; from:

http://harkless.org/steve/writing/Trance_Dance_and_Ecstasy.html

¹ Goodman, Felicitas D; online at <http://www.ritualbodypostures.com>

¹ Musafar, Fakir; About Fakir; from: <http://www.bodyplay.com/>