

Dances in Ancient Cultures: A Comparative Study between Greek and Mayan Dance

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Abstract:

Two distant cultures, ancient Greece and the Maya, both practiced ritualized dances in honor of their gods. The functions and motivations behind these dances, however, reflected two contrasting societal roles of the dance. This essay explores the sociological and religious contexts of each culture, and how dances are representative of each culture's societal needs.

Introduction:

Two civilizations, Classical Greece and Maya, couldn't be more distant and alien from one another. The Classical Greek civilization flourished during the 5th to 4th centuries BCE, while the Classical Mayan civilization blossomed in the 3rd Century CE, only to disastrously collapse in the 9th. Distance-wise, the Greeks were thriving on the European side of the Mediterranean, while the Mayans lived in the tropical jungles of Mesoamerica.

Yet they weren't complete aliens. One can easily spot the similarities between the Greek and Mayan civilizations in their political culture. Neither civilization was ever unified into a single state. Various city-states instead competed with one another for dominance, only to be conquered by foreign empires; Rome for Greece and Spain for the Maya. Besides their political culture, the Greeks and the Maya also richly depicted elaborate dances on their vases. These dances weren't simple entertainments for the respective cultures. They embodied complex religious meanings dedicated to special deities. This essay

will compare and contrast these religiously charged dance motifs in Classical Greek and Mayan art.

Classical Greece:

Classical Greece refers to a period of ancient Greek civilization after the Persian Wars. This period is well-known for the numerous cultural and military achievements of the various city-states, such as Athens and Sparta. These city-states, the *poleis*, made dedications to many deities whom the Greeks worshiped for their divine favors and guardianship. Among those deities was Dionysus, whom the Greeks believed as the god of wine and festivals.¹ The cult of Dionysus led to the celebration of many festivals for him, and many cultural achievements followed. One of the renowned works from this period is the theatre performances and the playwrights of Athens. To celebrate the gods, especially Dionysus, Athens held a festival that occurred

¹ "Dionysos and the Symposium." Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Accessed July 31, 2025. <https://www.mfa.org/gallery/dionysos-and-the-symposium>.

annually. In this festival, there was a competition of playwrights and sponsors competing to perform the best play in tragedy or comedy. One of the most famous tragic plays is *The Bacchae* by Euripides. The *Bacchae* takes place in ancient Thebes, where conflict between Penthus, the king of Thebes, and his brother Dionysus wreaks havoc.² The *Bacchae* captures the role Dionysus played in Classical Greek society. He was not only a god of wine and festivals, but also of chaos and breaking of social norms.

Classical Maya:

Classical Mayan civilization shares some similarities with Classical Greece. The Classical period for the Mayans is noted for their monumental architecture, astronomy, and mathematics. The Maya also made a remarkable contribution to mathematics. The modern calendar can be credited to the sophisticated astronomy of the Maya. They commonly used the calendar consisting of a 260-day Tzolk'in calendar for their religious ceremonies.³ Beyond culture and technology, the Classical Mayans were politically divided into city-states as well. Like Athens and Sparta vying for power in the Aegean, so too did the powerful Mayan city-states such as Tikal and Calakmul.

One of the intriguing aspects of the Classical Mayan civilization is that their urban centers were built in the tropical rainforest. Archaeological excavations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries revealed that the Mayans maintained their water supplies and agriculture through sophisticated management. Yet, living in the tropics did pose many challenges to Maya people, such as the lack of food storage and maintenance

of infrastructure.⁴ Unfortunately, this prosperous Classical Mayan civilization collapsed suddenly and was succeeded by the Postclassic period. Many scholars have suggested numerous potential reasons behind the collapse. However, there is no clear evidence for the central cause of the collapse.

Dances as Religious Rituals:

Dances were an iconic aspect of both Classical Greek civilization and Mayan civilization. In the Classical Greek dance performances, iconic movements were associated with specific cults, such as the Maenads and their cult of Dionysus. The Greeks praised Dionysus as a god of festivals and wine.

Dionysus was especially celebrated among young women, and a group of cultic followers of Dionysus, performing hectic dances as they paraded during the god's festivals, came to be known as the Maenads. The Maenads seemed to have become associated in the Greek mind with the mythical nurse of Dionysus, who poured wine and honey for celebrations.⁵ Among numerous types of dance they performed, especially Epilenios was dedicated to Dionysus when the grapes were pressed. Nymphs performed with ecstatic enthusiasm to represent him with every movement, eventually causing the perspective of the many Ancient Greek people towards the dancers to be negative, not simply because of their chaotic movement.⁶ In Classical Greece, both the social norms and laws expected women to be mild and moderate. For instance, public law of Athens prevented women from participating in ritual and religious ceremonies, particularly because these forms of worship encouraged drunkenness and

² Goldhill, Simon. *Reading Greek Tragedy*. 2nd ed. Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xix-xx

³ Jacob Leah. "Mayan Calendar: EBSCO."

EBSCO Information Services, Inc. |

www.ebsco.com, 2023.

<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/religion-and-philosophy/mayan-calendar>.

⁴ Ardren, Traci. *Everyday life in the classic Maya world*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. (Traci 2023), 7

⁵ Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life, 31

⁶ Lawler, Lillian B. *The Maenads: A Contribution to the Study of the Dance in Ancient Greece*. Vol. 6. Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1927. (Lawler 1927), 7

ecstasy, meaning that Nymphus' performances were simply violating the laws.⁷

Similar to the Greeks, the Maya also danced for their gods. This is clearly shown in the Holmul dance, where the male dancers in elaborate costumes emulate the Young Corn God from the Mayan creation myth. The Holmul dance symbolized the authority of kings by embodying various symbols of Mayan deities. Through the inclusion of the most powerful gods in the Mayan mythology in the dance regalia, especially the Young Corn God and God K'awiil, the Mayan royalty sought to embody their power in the dance.⁸ Therefore, ancient Mayans made numerous gestures that were clearly symbolic in their culture. For example, anthropologist Alfred Tozzer identified that a gesture of one hand placed on the opposite shoulder means a "gesture of peace" in the colonial period.⁹ And since the classical Mayans thought that the god they believed had the form of animals, there were many postures that represented the animals from the dance performances of the Maya. The animal that is easily discovered is the movement of the snakes. Particularly, from the well-known Maya's painting, "Altar Vase", the snake spirits are shown in dancing positions. The Maya ritual dance mostly highlighted the costumes worn by the dancers. Even the dances were named for the objects held by dancers, or for the costumes worn.¹⁰

⁷ Lefkowitz, Mary R., and Maureen B. Fant. *Women's life in Greece and Rome: A source book in translation*. 4th ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. (Lefkowitz and Maureen 2020), 206-207

⁸ Budet, Dorie. "Holmul Dancer" Theme in Maya Art. Accessed July 25, 2025. <https://www.mesoweb.com/pari/publications/RT08/HolmulDancer-OCR.pdf>.

⁹ Looper, Matthew G. *To be like gods: Dance in ancient Maya civilization*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. (Looper 2021), 84

¹⁰ Grube, Nikolai. *Ancient mesoamerica*. Vol. 2. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. (Grube 2008), 206

The Greek Dance of the Maenads:

Following the Archaic period and the Persian wars, the Classical period of Greek civilization blossomed from the triumph over the Persians. Classical Greece saw major developments in architecture, philosophy, and literature, where various city-state leaders were sponsoring these developments. One of those developments was theatre, where various playwrights would compete to win the honor of best play in festivals. In Athens, that festival was dedicated to Dionysus Eleutheros, Dionysus the Liberator. The ecstatic aspect of the god functioned as a vehicle for social liberation during the celebration, breaching boundaries of expected social norms and morality in ancient Athenian society. It was the womenfolk of Athens who were most associated with this revelry of Dionysus. Although Athens was a very misogynistic society, where women were expected to veil themselves and not go out in public, in both artistic depictions on vase paintings and historical records of the Dionysian cult, women were the harbingers and the most prominent adherents of Dionysus.¹¹

These ecstatic female cultists of Dionysus were called the Maenads. As much as Dionysus was sacred, his cultic followers were terrifying beings for many Greeks. Their notoriety is best exemplified by Euripides' tragic play *the Bacchae*. In *the Bacchae*, Dionysus unleashes his maenads upon Thebes, who rejected his godhood and his rightful throne in the city. The maenads wreak havoc, making loud noises and causing much destruction. The tragedy ends with the brutal murder of Pentheus, prince of Thebes, by his own mother, who succumbed to the revelry of the wine god. This play is known for capturing the anxiousness and dangers of revelry and

¹¹ Lawler, Lillian B. "The Maenads: A Contribution to the Study of the Dance in Ancient Greece." *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 6 (January 1, 1927): 69–112. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/4238532?refr_eqid=fastly-default. 70-72

uncontrolled women, all concentrated into the godhood of Dionysus.¹²

Several iconic features in the visual arts distinguish the Maenads from conventional ancient Greek women. Their dresses, often clad in fawnskin or other animal skin, are stark contrasts to the more commonly worn paradalis. They also carry the *thyrsos*, the staff of Dionysus. Beyond their superficial differences from the ordinary Greek women, the maenads are also represented by the erratic dances. Their dynamic movement and poses, full of *ekstasis*, are represented on many vase paintings.¹³

The maenads are the utter opposites of the conventional Greek women and prevalent gender roles expected of women in Classical Greece, especially in Athens, where women were seen as passive, domestic, and usually beneath men. The 4th-century Athenian playwright Menander wrote in one of his lost plays that a free woman, especially a married freewoman, should stay at home and never leave for the countryside. A Roman writer has noted that Greek women were severely limited in their activities compared to Roman women. He noted how women were relegated to a specific room in their homes, the *gynaecium*. Whereas Roman women could attend parties and go out in public, it was inappropriate for Greek women to do either of those.¹⁴ With such restricted social norms, what women could do was severely limited in the Classical Greek world. The maenads directly challenge this cultural restriction on women by depicting women as wild, uncontrollable, and *bacchic* beings. The cult of Dionysus was thus a social release for

many of these Greek women. The dances were part of that release.

The festivals dedicated to Dionysus were found in various Greek cities, usually involving young women. Their wild dances were clearly recorded by contemporary Greeks down until the 4th Century BCE. Dodds has compared the rowdy behaviors of Maenads in ancient Greek depictions with those of much later medieval European dances. Much like how Euripides depicted the infectious and often ecstatic power of the Bacchic cult in *the Bacchae*, many medieval European societies were enchanted by infectious dances. These enchantments of whole towns were usually attributed to certain saints, not unlike how the bacchic madness was attributed to Dionysus. Dodds saw the biannual celebration of Dionysus as a social outlet, in which women can release their social stress in an organized manner, dedicated to the god of revelry. The denial of one's bacchic revelry, Dodds says, is to "repress the elemental in one's own nature; the punishment is the sudden complete collapse of the inward dykes when the elemental breaks through perforce and civilization vanishes."¹⁵

One can easily connect the dots between the rather repressive Greek gender norms and the dangerous release of ecstasy among women during the festivals of Dionysus. The celebration of Dionysus was a venue of social release among ancient Greek women; loudly reveling in dances and wine, escaping into the wilderness, and breaking every social and gender norm expected of them. The manic dance of the Maenads was a mode of psychological release for these ancient Greek women.

Mayan Hol'mul dances:

Mayan dances, much like Greek dances, are usually depicted in the form of vase paintings. These Codex-style ceramics contain important texts and depictions of Mayan mythology that were otherwise lost over time during the Spanish

¹² Euripides. *Bacchae and Other Plays*. Edited by Edith Hall. Translated by James Morwood. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xv, xix-xx, xxxii-xxxiii

¹³ Edwards, Mark W. "Representation of Maenads on Archaic Red-Figure Vases." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 80 (November 1960): 78-87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/628377>. 80, 84

¹⁴ Ardren, Traci. *Everyday life in the classic Maya world*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. (Traci 2023), 38, 208

¹⁵ Dodds, E. R. *Maenadism in the Bacchae*. Vol. 3. 33 vols. England: Cambridge University Press, 1940. (Dodds, 1940) 155-176

colonial rule. And among those ornately painted Mayan vessels, the archaeological site of Holmul in Guatemala has produced the most prevalent dance motifs in Mayan art. The “Holmul dancers” on these vase paintings from the Holmul region are richly decorated with various accessories that symbolize Mayan deities. The dancers are usually male, with royal regalia, meaning these dances were mostly performed by kings. Scholars have observed various symbolisms of Mayan deities in accessories and dresses worn by the Holmul dancers. The most prominent symbolism is the symbols of the Maize god, represented by the accessories worn by the Holmul dancers, such as the long headgear that resembles the maize leaves.¹⁶ Another prominent symbolism belongs to K’awiil, also known as God K. K’awiil was a powerful god of lightning, creation, and power. Because of K’awiil’s role as a creator god in the Mayan pantheon, his symbolism was extremely important to Mayan political power. On various vase paintings with the Holmul dancer motifs, the heads of K’awiil feature prominently as another accessory worn by the dancers.¹⁷

In order to understand the implications of the Holmul dance and its religious symbolisms, the dance needs to be put into the context of Classical Mayan kingship. Mayanists have noted that these “Holmul dancers” were usually high-ranking males. Naturally, it can be deduced that the religious symbolism of the Holmul dance held a significant implication for classical Mayan kingship. Classical Mayan kingship was an absolute monarchy, where the king and his dynasty’s rule was justified on a religious basis. Epigraphic evidence shows that certain powerful Mayan kings went as far as to refer to themselves as *k’uhul ajaw*, “Holy Lord”. The kings are thought to be descendants of ancient and divine

lineages, which granted them the legitimacy to rule their domain. Simon Martin connects this divine kingship with the activities of Classical Mayan kings. These Mayan rulers had to “perform” their kingship to the members of the court and the subjects of the kingdom. Surviving Classical Mayan art shows these rulers “conjuring” kings or divine ancestors, actively engaging with their deities. Architecture was another venue for expressing kingship, as the kings sponsored the construction of monuments that would become a tangible manifestation of their power. Beyond these visual representations of the kings’ connection with the gods, the Classical Mayan kings also “performed” their divine favors. The kings were adorned with jewels, feathers, and other items that made them visually distinct from the others.¹⁸

Dances, too, would have been another ritual for the Classical Mayan kings to express their divine authority. With their godly backracks and godlike costumes, the Mayan rulers were performing ritual dances to garner the favor of the gods; mimicking the young Maize god for a bountiful harvest and K’awiil for his authority as the god of lightning and creation. The Holmul dances on vase paintings were the snapshots of these ritual dances performed by the kings.¹⁹ If the dances of the Maenads were the breaking of social norms, the Holmul dancers were reinforcing the dominant ideology of the Classical Mayan Society: the divine kingship. The Maya king’s authority was justified by the conjuring of divine favors through various performances, including their dances.

Conclusion:

The Greek and Mayan dances discussed in this essay thus show how dances can serve different sociological functions. Both of these dances were dedicated to each culture’s respective deities, with the dance of the Maenads dedicated to Dionysus

¹⁶ Reents-Budet, Dorie. “The ‘Holmul Dancer’ Theme in Maya Art.” Essay. In Sixth Palenque Round Table, 1986, edited by Virginia M. Fields, 217–355. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991., 217,

¹⁷ Grube, Nikolai. “Classic Maya Dance.” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 3, no. 2 (September 1992): 201–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s095653610000064x>.

¹⁸ Simon Martin. *Ancient maya politics: A political anthropology of the Classic period 150-900 CE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.(Simon, 2020) 144

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164-165

and the Mayan dance dedicated to the young Maize god. But the roles they play in Greek and Mayan societies couldn't be more different. The Maenads were young women who, in Classical Greek societies, were expected to be indoors and only perform domestic duties. The Holmul dancers on Mayan vase paintings, however, were powerful males, usually the kings themselves.

The Greek dances of the Maenads are a means of release, breaking social norms and expectations during the festival of Dionysus. Women were freed from their gender roles and confinement to domestic duties as they reveled in the mountains. The Holmul dance of the Mayan kings garnered divine favors from the Young Maize God and K'awiil so that the divine kingship could be maintained. If one dance was a method of, albeit briefly, liberating women from their patriarchal societies, the other dance was dedicated to the *status quo* and the maintenance of the predominant leadership of that society. The dances of the Maenads and the Holmul dance of Classical Greek and Mayan civilizations thus reveal that dancing as a performance art can perform two starkly different social functions.

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