

TILLEULS À DANSER®

DANCE LIME TREES, TREES FOR DANCING LOVE AND LIFE

Dance lime trees have come down to us from an extremely ancient European tradition. The earliest representation of a dance lime tree is found in Anne de Bretagne's celebrated Book of Hours, which dates from 1508 and is kept in the French Bibliothèque Nationale. Dance lime trees also figure in paintings by the Flemish artists Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Pieter Bruegel the Younger, as well as by Lukas Taffle. Arnold van Gennep, the great French specialist of folklore and ethnology, describes a very old lime tree that survived until the end of the nineteenth century in the northern French village of Lynde. The tree, which had a double crown and a multitude of intertwining branches, was surrounded by a sort of platform. A few exceedingly old and rare dance lime trees still grow today in various parts of Germany, Belgium and Holland.



*Anne de Bretagne's
Book of Hours - BNF*



Lime tree in a nursery



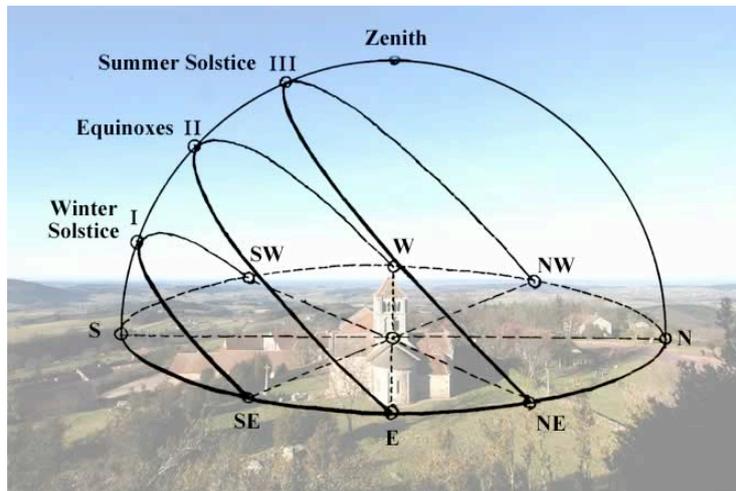
*A celebration including a play
and a procession (détail)
Pieter Bruegel the Younger*

Dance lime trees were located in the centre of the village. One or more platforms, supported by wooden structures, were built around their trunks, and these were used for dancing. Rope-makers, who used lime tree bark for their ropes, were the first to build platforms in lime trees in order to facilitate their work. Over time, these platforms began to be used by the villagers for dancing, and little by little they became places where festivities occurred, and where people gathered to dance.

Today's interest in dance lime trees represents the resurgence of an ancient cultural tradition. All French schoolchildren learn of how good King Louis dispensed justice and medicine beneath a great tree. The goal of the dance lime tree project is to replant dance lime trees throughout Europe, both in villages and more urban settings.

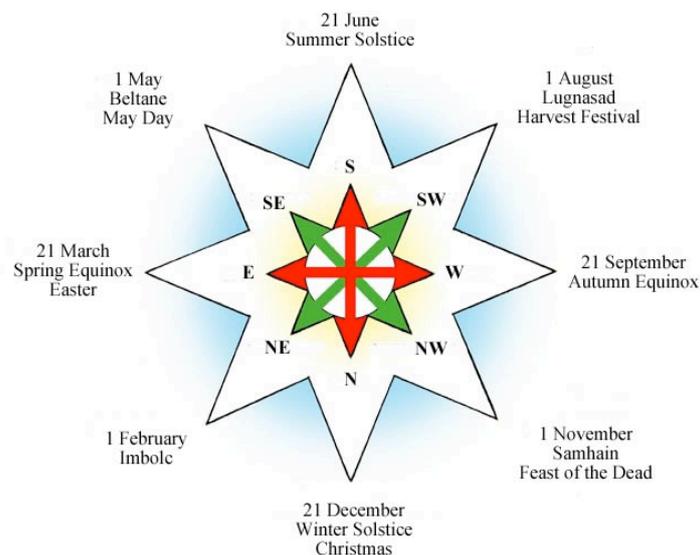
Description and Symbolism

The three tiers of the dance lime tree represent the course of the sun at three specific times of year: the winter solstice (the shortest day of the year), the equinoxes (when the day and the night are of equal length) and the summer equinox (the longest day of the year). The three levels, or circles, correspond to the time of sunrise on the days of the winter and summer solstices and at the two equinoxes. At the summer solstice, the sun rises in the northwest, reaches its zenith in the south, and sets in the northeast. At the equinoxes, it rises in the east, reaches its zenith in the south, and sets in the west. At the winter solstice, it rises in the southeast, reaches its zenith in the south, and sets in the southwest.



An **X** can be traced between the northeast and the southwest, the southeast and the northwest. This x-shaped cross is known as the Cross of Taranis, or St Andrew's Cross. If another cross (+) is superimposed along the perpendicular east/west and north/south axes, a circle dividing the year into eight equal parts is obtained. These divisions determined the times of the eight yearly nature festivals of Europe, which were celebrated from time immemorial in both monotheistic and polytheistic traditions.

The agrarian year was based on the cycle of the seasons, which corresponded to the life cycles of plants, animals and humans in an eternal round of birth, life, death and re-birth.



The cycle symbolises existence, from birth to re-birth. The sun is “born anew” at the winter solstice : the days lengthen at the time of the French *Chandeleur* celebration (1 February); grow longer from the spring equinox to the summer solstice, the period of fertility from the time of planting to harvest in early August; and grow shorter until the winter solstice, when the cycle begins again. Dance lime trees, which provide a link between the heavens, mankind and the earth, can help people of today to rediscover these eternal cycles and to find their place in the universe.



Dance Lime tree in EFFELDER (Germany)

Like other trees planted in village centres, the lime tree was a symbol, and was linked to specific customs. According to several European systems of mythology it symbolised a pillar which guaranteed order and held up the divine vault. It was for this reason that people in olden times dispensed justice beneath these trees, and that community meetings and debates (known as Things in Northern Europe; the Tynwald, the Isle of Man’s parliament, is one of the last living examples) were held in their shade. The sun’s course over the year, which determines the eight nature celebrations, is used in heraldry, and is an element of many coats of arms. The dance lime tree can be linked with structures and cultural objects as varied as the Menorah and the bandstands found in parks. The lime tree is associated with Freya, the Scandinavian goddess of love. The heart-shaped lime leaf is associated with the heart and all its symbols, and the shape of the leaves explains the tree’s association with love, fidelity and justice.

The celebrations that took place in and around dance lime trees kept people in touch with their profound, physical selves via the above-mentioned natural cycles, as well as through memories of the past and their ancestors, which were also linked to the place of celebration. Festivities brought together nature and culture, attuning people to the laws of existence and space and joining past, present and future. Every culture celebrated natural cycles in its own way, based on its past and present, in order to construct its future; each person was master of his own destiny. As Béatrice de Villaines and Guillaume d’Andlau¹ mention in *Les Fêtes retrouvées* (Paris, Casterman, 1997), “sacred and profane elements often intermingled in these celebrations, which referred to both paganism and Christianity. Gods and goddesses, and saints in later periods, were feted in celebrations that placed special emphasis on thresholds and rites of passage and which fed the collective imagination and ensured the cohesion of the community and the transmission of rituals from one generation to the next.” Today, secular ceremonies such as marriage, anniversaries and birthdays can be celebrated in or beneath dance lime trees.

¹ Béatrice de Villaines et Guillaume D’Andlau , *Les Fêtes retrouvées*, Paris, Casterman, 1997.

In conclusion, the dance lime tree®, anchored within the traditional festivals of Europe which occur throughout the area in a variety of guises, can help to reinforce the sentiment of unity among European peoples. A truly European tree, which we hope will be symbolically planted in each village, town, city and neighbourhood, the dance lime concept is in perfect accord with the wishes of Jacques Santer as set out in his 1997 project entitled “A Soul for an Ethical and Spiritual Europe”, which was inspired by a declaration made in 1992 by Jacques Delors that stated “if Europe does not acquire a soul, a spirituality and a meaning in the next ten years, all will be lost”². This issue has not been adequately resolved to this day.

Themes which are regularly debated today because of their problematic nature can be resolved through the planting of dance lime trees. These themes concern villages and more urban communities which, confronted with a loss of soul, are in search of projects that will bring together their populations. The idea of community will regain its original meaning, in accordance with the ideas of the early 20th century German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies contrasted modern, individualistic society with an organic community which was based on and reinforced links among its population³. Dance lime trees, which can live up to 1000 years, will provide a venue for all generations to gather together, thereby combating crumbling values and solitude.



A very ancient dance lime tree in SCHENKLENGSFELD (Germany)

As noted in the works of Françoise Sironi⁴ it would appear that the profound malaise that assails society today results from a dearth of culture and of a feeling of being uprooted, a dehumanising process which leads to emotional trauma. Planting dance lime trees and a return to traditional cultural practices would help in healing the individual and the community of these ills.

² Solange Wydmush, « Intégration européenne et réseaux transnationaux, le lobbying européen des églises » in Bastian, Pierre, Champion Françoise, Rousselet Kathy, *La Globalisation du Religieux*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 251.

³ *Community and Society*, New Brunswick, USA, London, Transaction Publishers, 1993.

⁴ <http://www.ethnopsychiatrie.net/actu/collegedeF.htm>

The dance lime tree, part of the cultural heritage of Europe and of each European citizen, can help to create a feeling of belonging to one's community and to optimise local resources through already-existing structures. The trees will generate economic activity, calling upon both traditional and more contemporary job-holders such as the tree nursery workers who will grow and prune them, landscape architects, carpenters and cabinet makers, those involved in the food industry, costume makers, musicians, actors and those involved in communications and the computer industry. They will also stimulate commerce, develop new markets, attract visitors and enhance tourism.

The dance lime tree philosophy is in accordance with a concern for the environment and sustainable development. Its promotion of the principles of ecology is exemplified by its support of planting of trees that will be enjoyed by future generations.

In Practice

The planting ritual takes place in the autumn. The dance lime tree is planted by four boys and four girls, who then look after the tree throughout the year, sweeping and cleaning around it and making sure it is in good health. This team will be made up of volunteers, and will lead to the restoration of the guild system. A "green guild" made up of volunteers can be formed. Each community is free to create its own rituals in accordance with local or regional traditions and in keeping with the musicians, singers and dancers at its disposal.

Dances and songs that belong to local folklore can be used or adapted, and new ones can also be created. It is interesting to observe how dance styles reflect mentalities as well as the current state of a given community. The more closely-knit the community, the tighter its dance circles. Over the centuries small communities have given way to society as we know it, and in the same way, round dances gradually evolved into serpentine dances, with dance today becoming a completely individual affair.⁵ Dance allows traditions to be handed down, and it is important to remember the words of Guilcher⁶: "The real questions have to do first and foremost with the nature of the handing down: its ends and its means, its place and its role, and in particular the milieu in which plays this role". We believe it is possible to reclaim our dance heritage, while also grafting creative new elements onto old stock.

Songs will be used in a similar way, always bearing in mind the songs of yore, which were sung while dancing took place. Each village or region will take stock of existing songs through contact with local folkdance, folk music and folk singing groups. Themed vocal groups can be created; vocal groups can also focus on a particular theme, such as songs connected to the various occupations and trades, May Day songs, Christmas songs, children's songs, songs of husbands and wives and of people born the same year, songs of love and marriage, marching songs, laments, historic songs, burlesque and bawdy songs, and drinking songs. Research can be undertaken in more urban settings, and competitions can be set up to stimulate the writing of new songs. Emphasis will be placed on bringing the community together, and of creating a pleasant atmosphere for community members who share these special moments.

Traditional costumes will not be used; costumes will instead be brought up to date, sometimes in order to refine them, at other times to change an old-fashioned style into something more up-to-date. This renewal will be undertaken in a spirit of respect for one's

⁵ Jean-Michel Guilcher, *La Danse traditionnelle en France, d'une ancienne civilisation paysanne à un loisir revivaliste*, Editions Modal Folio, 1998.

⁶ *id.*, p. 206.

heritage and affection for well-loved regional styles such as the Austrian *dirndl* and *trachten* and the Norwegian *Bunad*.



Costume 1 :
Austrian Dirndl
Image :
www.chiemseer-dirndl.de

Costumes 2, 3 & 4 :
Norwegian Bunad
Image : www.bunadrosen.no

Research into traditional marriage outfits should also be undertaken, as these were richly varied in styles and colours in earlier times, and could be reused today as garb for traditional festivals. Wearing these costumes today is both a return of and a return to tradition. Perhaps costumes could be worn on a particular day: in Austria, for example, people of high society began wearing traditional costumes one day a week. Their example was soon followed by the rest of the population, thereby preserving and perpetuating the wearing of traditional clothing.

It is obvious that traditional costumes could never be produced on an industrial scale. Small-scale production, on the other hand, could act as a stimulant to the local economy, as well as bringing the community together around the work of seamstresses, embroiderers, lace-makers, weavers, etc.

Another interesting aspect of returning to traditions would be to make an inventory of the most beautiful trees in each community, as well as of its springs, fountains and bread ovens. In this way, ancient customs could be restored, and people could return to living traditions. Each community or family could devise its own coat of arms, which would lead to a renaissance of the arts of heraldry, a veritable art with its own particular symbolism, colours, and graphic codes.

The dance lime tree could also become a meeting-place for groups and societies having to do with nature and the trades of old, including growers of heritage trees and seeds, tree grafters, hedgerow planters, those who conserve heritage fruits and vegetables, study botany, press flowers, do wicker-work, study medicinal plants and ethno-botany, collect mushrooms (a day of mushroom hunting could be followed by a meal made with the ‘harvest’), and study history and genealogy. Lectures series could be organised. Music courses and art courses on drawing, heraldry, genealogy, pottery and photography could be given, as well as courses on creating an Internet site. Activities would be themed according to the eight traditional nature festivals: in May a May Queen would be chosen; medicinal plants could be sold at the summer solstice; a parade of people in costume could be organised on 1 November (this celebration could be called “Festival of the Opening to the Other World” rather than Halloween), and a Christmas market could be held.

To conclude, thanks to the dance lime tree, the identity of each person could develop in an atmosphere of beauty and harmony. Individuals would no longer live in a uniform world, but would be replenished through a profusion of renewed traditions. Love of all living things would lead to a veritable return to creation and imagination.

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