



Lazarines wearing radiant headdresses, Kosmach, Ukraine. Photo courtesy Mary Kelly.



Women's festive costume from Thasos. This costume with its precious gold embroidery and enveloping veil conveys both the wearer's worth and the fact that she is worthy of protection. The strong golden border on the apron reflects the containing image of the garden fence. Photo courtesy Dora Stratou Theatre collection.

(All the Dark-Haired Girls), from the Greek island of Thassos. It was originally danced by young women who had reached menarche but were not yet married, a peer group known as *lazarines*. All over the Balkans, groups of *lazarines* met during the forty days of Lent, to learn from older women specific dances, songs and rituals to help them prepare for their adult lives.

The central figure in 'Ola Ta Melachrina' is the young woman who builds a wooden fence 'to protect her garden'. She is seen as precious and worthy of protection; capable of building her own fence; and in control of opening and closing her garden gate. This shows a lovely balance between the need to protect and contain the power of her blossoming fertility, and giving her authority and autonomy over her own sexual choices. We see this in her choice to open the gate and invite in the gardener who – crucially – knows how to treat her with respect, removing his shoes, bringing gifts, and treasuring with her the delights of the garden.

The dance also gives us the chance to experience and embody the quality of protection. The basketweave hold allows each dancer to feel that she is both securely held by the other women in her community, and that she herself contributes to the safe holding which benefits the others. Each of us dancing is like a fencepost in the fence described by the song, part of something stronger than ourselves; as we see and know our contribution to the strength of the collective, we are helped to understand and appreciate our own strength also. The dance step is slightly more complex than many other women's ritual

dances, requiring a higher degree of mindfulness; this practice of greater awareness will also help the young women keep themselves and one another safe as they cross through puberty into their newly marriageable state.

The young woman's fence is a perfect illustration of community: For our fence to be strong, every post must be strong; for

our community to be strong, we must help strengthen every woman in our community. The emphasis on cooperation and mutual support is a perfect antidote to today's competitive, hierarchical society, which is based on the idea that only one person can be strong, and all the others must be weak. But the truth is, there is no advantage in conspiring to weaken others so you yourself might feel stronger. Seen from the point of view of the ancient ways, behaviour which weakens the whole also weakens the individual.

The song's final image is of St John's Wort, the powerful healing herb whose 'sun-headed' flowers, strongly resembling the radiant headdresses of the *lazarines*, appear at midsummer. This can be understood as the collective wish that each of the dancing maidens, now in the early spring of their lives, will come safely into their own 'summer' of ripeness, maturity and golden radiance, and grow into women who are happy, fertile and creative.

As we learn to listen closely to traditional dances, we see how they teach us to be better members of our community. Every danced step helps us understand our mutual connection and interdependence. Through the dances we learn to help one another to fulfil our potential, to know our worth and that we all are worthy of protection. And every time we practice these ancient yet revolutionary values in dance, we are already transforming our selves, our community and our world. Laura Shannon © 2014

Bibliography

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Women's costume of the Marides people in Evros, Thrace, Greece, with the golden-fringed headdress resembling St John's Wort flowers. Photo courtesy Loulouda Zikida.