

## Looking for Medieval Ravers in Rhineland

There have been three years since I started looking into the so-called *choreomanias*, *dance epidemics*, or *dance manias*, historical mass dances that "disturbed" the establishment in various corners of the world. I am writing this *half report - half article* during my flight to Madagascar, where I will tour *Ramanenjana* -- a docufiction performance based on a trance mass dance event that happened in 1863 in Madagascar, in relation to colonial oppression.

Coming from a South-Eastern European country, where mass dances were used to manipulate the population, I am particularly interested in events where dance appears spontaneously and has the opposite effect on powerful political or religious institutions. This August, the project that concerned my *NRW Dance Research Scholarship* is significantly intertwined with the enterprising Christian Church.

Only four years before the Great Western Schism that divided the Catholic institution of God for 39 years, a mysterious and terrifying event frightened the Rhineland priesthood. Enthusiastically looking for what happened in 1374, I started with the most common information that everyone can find on the web. In the summer of 1374, thousands of people (presumably) danced against their will for days on end in a pilgrimage that started in Aachen and took over influential cities from Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. This event was known in history as *Saint John's Dance*, *Johannestanz*, *Tanzwut*, *Tanzwahn*, or, as I mentioned above, *a dance epidemic*. The geographical area of this more or less peculiar event is set around rivers Rhine and Moselle. Some historians also attempted to establish a date for its presumed "outburst", the 24th of June 1374. This date coincides with the celebration of St. John; probably, that's also the source of the name.

Before discussing the *Tanzwut* of 1374, I feel compelled (by my own ethical principles) to mention that I haven't found any historical writing about this "crazed dance mania" that could be read as a trustworthy source. Most of the medieval historical sources and the first accounts of this event have been written by Christian clerics. Maybe that is why this mass dance is remembered in history as *lots of people dancing involuntarily, screaming the names of certain demons, feeling that they are drowning in a red sea of blood, begging priests and monks to save their souls, asking to be beaten and whipped*, and the list can continue.

Looking at the description of the dance itself, you don't have to be an experienced dance practitioner to wonder where is the crazy part. The *Tanzwahn* was a fast-paced, jumpy dance, with big leaps in the air, not modest at all, many times charged with frivolity, performed by groups of people as a round dance and even pair dance. It sounds interesting; I'm not crazy about it, but I would never refer to that dancing as crazy or manic. Nevertheless, the dance became a pathological manifestation in the eyes of the frightened medieval clerics because of its duration, the words that accompanied the dance, and peoples' inability to stop moving.

Although this inability, as it is described in *The Life of Pope Gregory XI*, a chronicle written by Petrus de Herenthal, could have also been a way to cover up the "not wanting to stop dancing" aspect of it. The chronicle mentioned mentions people dancing due to the priesthood's corruption. People in Liege strongly believed that they were not adequately baptized because of the corrupt and sinful behavior of the priests.

Louis Backman's "Religious Dances in the Christian Church and Popular Medicine," first published in 1952, is a book with the most descriptions of these mass dancing episodes and accesses most of the archival sources available. Going through pages of historical and religious

observations, I was prone to think that this mass dance might not even be something so out of the ordinary, as it resembles greatly to other church dances performed in the Early Middle Ages -- at least from how Backman describes them. Backman explains that the church gradually erased these early ritualistic, performative practices from history. Though, astonishingly, by the end of the book, Backman does blame ergot poisoning for the dance.

If you want a more leisurely reading infused with pseudo-science, you can read what everyone reads when first intrigued by this story, "The Black Death and The Dancing Mania". First published in 1833, written by Justus Hecker, a German physician and medical writer, the book has two parts: one attributed to the *Black Death* and one to the *Dancing Mania*. Hecker considers the dance was caused by an actual disease in which people's minds were temporarily lost, together with their ability to control their bodies. What the priests believed blasphemous and devilish behaviour has now been transformed into epileptic crises.

The dance is now referred to as "a disease", "a spasmodic malady", "incurable aberration of the mind", "disgusting distortions of the body", "a mental plague" caused by the superstitions that arose from Saint John's Festival. Hecker might have found the roots of the disease in people's empty bowels, stricken by the pain of great hunger. I have been trying to find some sources in archives and other writings that mention dancers "roaring and foaming", as Hecker puts it. I didn't find any, but I am still looking. However, I did like that he mentioned the word *raving* to describe their action of dancing. So, I borrowed it.

Looking for evidence from the 14th-century clerics, which argued that thousands of people were stricken by the devil, or talking about the 19th-century physicians who reasoned that thousands of people were infected with a contagious dancing disease, the discourse remains similarly doubtful. Also, talking about the 21st-century dance artists that re-enact those dances as large-scale manias doesn't do any justice to the crowds that once filled the streets of Aachen, Cologne, Trier, Liege, Tongres, Utrecht, Maastricht, and many other villages in between.

As part of my scholarship, I took some consultation hours with Dr. Kelina Gotman, lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at King's College London, author of "Choreomania - Dance and Disorder". This fantastic work of Dr. Gotman took more than 15 years to be completed and brilliantly discusses choreomanias worldwide from anthropological and dance theory perspectives. Many things stayed with me as a result of the conversations we had. The first one is that I'll have to work with little information, and I won't find what I am looking for in Germany. As I struggled to find documents and traces of the choreomaniacs anywhere along the River Rhine, I understood that she was right. Although I took every archive, museum, library, church, and antique store by storm in Aachen, Cologne, and Liege, I could only find one document in the City Archives of Cologne.

But, being in Germany and traveling to Flanders and Netherlands helped in ways I never expected, which I will explain shortly. The other thing I discussed with Dr. Gotman was the church's and 19th-century physicians' inclination to control people's bodies. For a 19th-century proud and well-traveled physician, the choreomaniacs of medieval Europe were *trance dancing* just like the people of Africa. Their colonial appetite for labelling the exotic, the savage, and the immoral was deeply aroused by an event that might not have even existed.

What is even more bewildering to me is how the 21st-century highly cultured dance artists are reenacting crazed mass dances, adding even more confusion to the topic. I completely understand the desire to look for the unexplainable, as the explainable might be boring. If in the 14th century *Tanzwut* was perverted, in the 19th century, it was exotic; now, it's

therapeutically posh. Another person I talked to was Dr. Gregor Rohmann, whose book "Tanzwut" took me ages to find in a German library, but finally, I managed to get hold of it. I had a very informative online talk with Dr. Rohmann one week after my return to Bucharest. He helped me settle things down and maybe look at the information I gathered from a more objective historical perspective. Although, as a Medievalist, he seems adequately reluctant to admit one thing or another because of the lack of hard evidence, he told me that maybe these people were looking for a different way of connecting with God. If they were indeed doing that, they ended up being remembered in history for the opposite.

Traveling from city to city, discovering German villages, and trying to remake the route of the 1374 pilgrimage that started all this story taught me things I could never find in my long hours looking for archival material. For once, the routes connect nicely even today; there are also ancient roads that you can follow, like the one that connects Liege and Tongres. Although today these areas might seem close, the distances are indeed considerable. Walking between cities and then dancing in specific locations, like church yards, city squares, and sacred places seems more reliable than dancing the entire route. Who were these people that some clerics named "mira secta" (curious sect), heretics that jumped high into the air, producing anarchy in the cities they passed by, inviting the locals to join the dance? Dr. Rohmann also opened a discussion about the film "Paracelsus" by G.W. Pabst, released in 1943, considered today a propaganda film, in which there is a scene named *Totentanz* (Dance of death) that resembles something of choreomania. Paracelsus, a famous German physician, heals some people that resemble dancing zombies. More than the film itself, this scene demonstrates that the "dance epidemic" was part of German culture.

I don't know if this research will make the basis of the third episode dedicated to choreomanias and create a docu-series for the stage. Nevertheless, during the hot waves of the summer of 2022, visiting more than 20 churches and cathedrals, I, Simona Deaconescu, a convinced atheist, found inspiration in the Church. When stepping inside, tired by the road and the heat, the cold walls of the Church cool you down. Once relaxed, you see the colored light hitting the floor from the stained glass. The ceiling is so up, and the quality of sound is good. The Church looks like an exquisite, less pretentious theatre; it has a stage, chairs for the audience, and lots of scenography that add to the dramatism of the atmosphere. The height of the walls even allows for circus shows, which are indeed happening yearly at St. James Church in Liege, or so the super charismatic guide informed me.

Whatever the reason for the dancing of these "medieval ravers," for me, they opened a new way of addressing dance, more documentary in nature, less bombastic in form, and analytical enough to keep me interested in finding out more.