

# The Aseemkala Initiative: Exploring Healing for Women of Color Through Stories in Traditional Dances

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## Why traditional dance for women's healthcare?

For centuries, traditional communities around the world have used dance to heal themselves, their homes, and their lands<sup>1,2</sup>. Medicine, however, focuses on the disease and patient as the center of the treatment model, relegating other factors to the periphery<sup>2</sup>. This pathology-based focus forms the basis of many arts-based therapies used in medical settings, such as Dance Movement Therapy.

Traditional dances involve local traditions and religion, offering a strong framework to address social issues through performance. However, traditional dance limits itself in the stories narrated and remains understudied in public health and dance medicine fields. Connecting traditional dance structure to DMT's freedom to self-express to heal can improve health outcomes for women globally.

Access to quality healthcare is a basic human right denied to many women around the world. Barriers to care include inequities in resources, instability due to ongoing conflict, and disempowerment of indigenous cultures. When medicine creates solutions to address the lack of care, they often neglect to consider the voices of the women they aim to help. To find true health equity, we at Aseemkala believe we need to start at the source---listening to the women as they tell their stories with their music, language, and movement.



## About the Aseemkala Initiative

We are a group of female artists and physicians who use our traditional dances to perform stories of healthcare inequity. We are activists who believe that diversity in healthcare stories should be represented by diverse women through diverse traditional dances, empowering unique women while reminding the medical community about the shared goal of improving the human condition equitably.

## Traditional Dances

### *Nguillatun* of the Mapuche Healing Nature Through Dance



Above: Photo of Nguillatun in Lonquimay with Romero Family; Bottom: Rayen Huenepi a singer and dancer's photo. Taken with Permission.

### *Gnaoua Lila* of the Amazigh Trance for Mental Health Care



Gnaoua Dancing in Khamlia, Morocco. Taken with permission.

### *Khmer Classical Dance* of the Khmer Ramayana Epic for Community Healing



Above: Khmer Dance Class by Cambodian Living Arts, Inc. Bottom: Show by Kampot Traditional Dance School Taken with permission

## The Aseemkala Initiative Model for Traditional Dance-Based Empowerment for Women



## Telling Stories of Health Equity Through Traditional Dance

Our bodies tell stories in sickness and in health. Too often, these stories go unheard. At Aseemkala, we believe the catalyst for change is sharing these global stories through global traditional dances. For many women around the world, traditional dance remains a space where their knowledge and roles are celebrated—even as their circumstances and society complicate their access to care. Our mission is to reframe disempowering medical narratives in the context of traditional arts to remind women about their inherent potential as healthcare changemakers.

Our work focuses on three areas.

- **Choreography and performance**, creating a laboratory for innovative dances that mix narrative medicine and cultural mythology to explore social injustice.
- **Preserving knowledge on traditional arts** through research and expert interviews.
- **Connecting medical professionals to transformative performance-based medical storytelling** in a traditional arts medium by way of workshops and lectures.

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## Danced Based Medical Narratives Exploring Health Equity

### *Tripura Sundari*: Celebrating Women Transforming in Birth



- Choreography based on embryological development
- Celebrates the complexity and beauty of fetal development and the process of labor
- Explores the idea that all births are challenging and all births are natural, requiring transformation of both mother and infant

### *Chinnamasta's DNR Order*: Choosing End of Life Care



- Choreography based on the difficulties around end of life care choices
- Performance on nonverbal communication between physician and ICU patient and the complexities of surrogates making these decisions
- Explores ethics and importance of shared decision making

### *Bhairavi's Addiction*: How Physicians Battle Addiction



- Choreography based on the current epidemic of physician suicide and addiction, and the fear around seeking help
- Performance on the physician as a patient and pressures to not reveal vulnerability or seek support
- Explores the need for change in medical culture to support physicians