

# Sacred Drum Practice, Ancient Lineage, and the Feminine

## Rhythm, ritual, and remembering who held the drum

The frame drum is one of the oldest instruments known to humanity, appearing across cultures and continents in many forms. Its simplicity is part of its power. A stretched skin held within a circular frame mirrors the cyclical nature of time, the body, and communal life. While the drum appears in many traditions, it is used differently depending on cultural context, intention, and role.

Among many Indigenous peoples of North America, the drum has always been a **communal instrument** rather than a performance tool. It is used to hold time, gather people into shared rhythm, and support continuity across generations. Drumming accompanies prayer, ceremony, mourning, celebration, and everyday life. Because these practices have been maintained through continuous living traditions, rather than reconstructed, the drum carries responsibility as well as power. The drum holds the community together by holding time itself.

This understanding sits at the heart of sacred drum practice. The slow, steady single beat — often close to resting heart rate — is used most of the time because it supports regulation, safety, and togetherness. The drum does not drive experience forward; it steadies it. When voice is added to this steady ground, individuals are gently drawn out of private internal time and into shared temporal space. This is a way of arriving together, not leaving the body or the group.

Ethnomusicologist and frame drum practitioner **Layne Redmond** offers important historical context for this way of working in her book **When the Drummers Were Women**. Through archaeological evidence, iconography, mythology, and cross-cultural research, Redmond shows that in many ancient societies the frame drum was primarily played by women, particularly in ritual, healing, and spiritual contexts. Priestesses, midwives, and temple women were often the holders of rhythmic knowledge, using the drum to support birth, death, seasonal rites, and communal coherence.

Redmond's work suggests that women's embodied experience of cyclical time — menstruation, fertility, pregnancy, birth, and menopause — made them natural keepers of rhythm. The drum was not an external instrument, but an extension of bodily intelligence. Rhythm was felt internally before it was expressed outwardly. Drumming supported altered states not as an escape, but as a deepening into embodied awareness, intuition, and relational presence.

In these ancient contexts, trance was not dramatic or dissociative. It arose through repetition, duration, and containment. Steady rhythms held over time allowed the thinking mind to soften while sensory and intuitive awareness deepened. These states were often quiet, focused, and grounded, supporting healing, insight, and ritual leadership rather than spectacle.

As patriarchal religions and social structures emerged, many of these female-led drum traditions were suppressed, marginalised, or erased. Drumming by women was often recast as dangerous, chaotic, or transgressive, while rhythm itself became associated with disorder rather than wisdom. Redmond's work is, in part, an act of recovery — restoring visibility to a lineage in which rhythm, ritual, and spiritual authority were once held by women.

This historical context matters for contemporary sacred drum practice. When rhythm is used to hold time, regulate the nervous system, and support communal presence, it echoes these ancient feminine traditions. The drum is not used to take people away from themselves, but to bring them more fully into their bodies, their cycles, and their relational field.

By contrast, in many shamanic traditions — particularly those rooted in Siberian and Central Asian lineages — the drum evolved into a vehicle for deliberate journeying. Faster, sustained rhythms were used to propel the practitioner into altered states for specific tasks, such as retrieval or divination. While powerful, this function is different in intention and structure from sacred drum work. Sacred drum practice remains grounded, relational, and communal, rather than task-driven or trance-led.

In sacred drum practice, the practitioner is not a shamanic guide or journey leader, but a **holder of rhythm**. The drum becomes a temporal anchor, offering steadiness so regulation, connection, and meaning can emerge naturally. This way of working honours the drum's ancient role as a feminine technology of coherence — one that remembers the body, the community, and time itself.