

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CAUCASUS DANCE

OVERVIEW

Dance, which has been an essential component of Caucasian culture since ancient times, was initially performed in religious ceremonies and spiritual rituals to appease the deities. The styles of Caucasian dance later changed through history, keeping some of its ritual significance, and became a part of hunting, agricultural, and fertility rituals and a tool of all festive celebrations performed on special occasions.

Dance in the Caucasus has been a way to create social bonds, promote cooperation and social interaction within their communities. Collectiveness is the most important feature of dance to express a person's communal identity in the Caucasus.

Cultural traits like dance which carry rich national traits still demonstrate cultural identity in contemporary urban society.

In the Caucasus, some traditional communities have strong local identity due to a particular historical background, geographical isolation, and local customs. Religious celebrations accompanied by dance are occasions for these communities to unite and revive the identity of the community.

The main themes of the traditional dances in the Caucasus were usually freedom, pride and love. In traditional dances, both men and women performed together. The rhythmic movements of performers can mean many things to different cultures. There are war dances to increase the ego of the valiant men. There are ritualistic dances for farmers to appease the deities to have a fruitful harvest and other types of dances to increase fertility.

Although the revolutionaries strongly rejected any imperial bourgeois art form that would take place within their newly established socialist system, classical Russian ballet continued to exist in the Soviet Union and played an important role in the development of art.

Classical ballet was an instrument to show the world that the Soviet Union was a socialist, but at the same time, advanced country dedicated to supporting and spreading cultural activities and institutions in so-called undeveloped regions. Soviet ballet companies began to tour the world to present the image of a strong, and cultured socialist Soviet Union.

The Soviets also promoted professional state dance companies that performed folk dances and toured worldwide. However, stage dancing in the 1950s and following years had to follow the repertoire of the state and was under heavy artistic censorship even after Stalin's death.

Dancers, choreographers, and companies were placed under the strict control of the state because ballet was regarded as being an art form of national interest, and it was only permitted when it complied with the tenets of socialist realism.

SOUTH CAUCASUS:

Ancient folk dance *Lezginka* of the Caucasus: The origin of the ancient folk dance *Lezginka* dates back to ancient times. It was a common folk dance performed in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Chechnya. It was a tribal dance, a hunting rite where men act like an eagle to prey on a girl. Each nation had its own version and style of performance.

GEORGIA: According to the *Anabasis* written by the Greek historian Xenophon in the 3rd century BCE, military songs and round dances were spread among the Georgians. The Georgian *Khorumi*, a war dance, originated in the 6th century BCE and belonged to Diaokh and Colchis. It was an exclusively male dance.

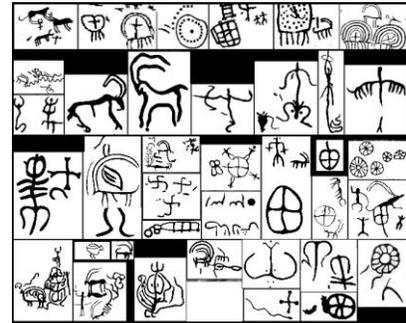
In a bowl dated back to the 2nd millennia BCE found in Trialeti, a carved circle dance scene shows that in Georgia dance and songs were used for ritual purposes (to show respect to *Shushpa* – the Moon God) and hunting (to show respect to the Goddess *Dali* – Hunting Goddess).



A silver bowl was discovered in excavations in Trialeti, showing a group of masked huntsmen on the bowl performing round dance. The bowl was dated to 18th-17th centuries BCE.

ARMENIA: There are rock paintings depicting scenes of dancing found in the town of Sisian in the Syunik province of Armenia dating back to the Paleolithic Era.

Rock paintings



AZERBAIJAN: As depicted in the Gamigaya petroglyphs dated from the 4th-1st millennia BCE, dancing is a very old tradition in the Caucasus.



Gamigaya petroglyphs, Ordubad

The dance scenes in the Gobustan rock pictures show that people performed dances for ritual purposes and to ensure success in the hunt.

Gobustan rock pictures



NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: From the Koban culture, small bronze figures from the 3rd millennium BCE depicted men performing a ritual dance on tiptoe. The dances of the Vainakh people carry some elements of the old legends and myths and were accompanied by music, as in the *Dance of Old Men*, *Dances of Young Men*, and *Dances of the Maidens*.

Questions:

1 – What was the purpose of ancient dances in the Caucasus? Why were war dances performed? What did other types of dances try to express?

Readings:

- 1- Violet on the Mountain: An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry, translated and edited by Kevin Tuite, Tbilisi: Amirani, 1994.
- 2- Ilyasov, L., *The Diversity of the Chechen Culture*, From Historical Roots to the Present, UNESCO, 2009.
- 3-Zardabli, I., *The History of Azerbaijan, from ancient times to present day*, Rossendale Books, 2014.
- 4- <https://erasmusu.com/en/erasmus-georgia/erasmus-blog/georgian-folk-dance-396943>
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POST – CLASSICAL PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: Dance in Georgia developed in parallel with agriculture and animal husbandry. The Kakhetian dance *Tsangala da Gogona* included features of agriculture such as sowing and watering.

The folk dance *Samaia* was an old pagan dance. It was performed by three women who represented Queen Tamar of Georgia and her glory.

ARMENIA: In the 5th century Movsés Xorenats'i himself mentioned that the old descendants of Aram (Armenians) talk about the lyre, their songs and dances in their ballads.

In his *Parallel Lives*, the Greek historian Plutarch also mentioned Armenian traditional dances.

The dance *Shalakho* performed by two men in order to gain the affection of a woman, was one of the oldest dances in Armenia.

Known from the early Middle Ages, the *Yarkhushta* was a warrior dance performed only by men in the Sassoun province of Western Armenia. In medieval times, before a battle the army used to perform this dance that looked like a fight between two warriors.

AZERBAIJAN:

Asma Kasma was one of the oldest wedding dances accompanied by a song called *Asma Kasma*. It was a dance with some dance features and a few jumps.

Abayi was a dance of the middle ages from the Shaki and Zaqatala regions in Azerbaijan. This dance was performed by a group of people making exaggerated movements, and was accompanied by music.

The national dance *Kochari*, was a type of Yalli (halay), which had a rhythm, accompanied by a balaban (duduk) and nagara (a type of drum).

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: The most important characteristic feature of Chechen dance was collectiveness. The main themes of the dances were usually love, freedom and pride. In traditional dances, both men and women performed together.

One of the traditional medieval Vainakh dances was the *Bakkhiychu nekhan khelkhar* (Dance of the Elderly), better known as Lezginka performed by middle-aged people. Each village had its own version like Atagi, Gudermes, Shali.

Other traditional dances were the *Nokhchi dance*, *Dance of the Daggers* and *Dance of the Dzhigit* performed by men.

Questions:

1- Dances are parallel developments with the social life of peoples of the Caucasus. What were the most common features of traditional dances in the Caucasus?

Readings:

- 1- Violet on the Mountain: An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry, translated and edited by Kevin Tuite, Tbilisi: Amirani, 1994.
- 2- Ilyasov, L., *The Diversity of the Chechen Culture*, From Historical Roots to the Present, UNESCO, 2009.
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EARLY MODERN PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS:



GEORGIA:

Khorumi: Khorumi was a war dance from Adjara in Georgia. It was based on the numerous invasions of the country dating from the 18th century. It was performed by only a few men. The dance incorporates the themes of war, the courage of Georgian soldiers and the celebration of victory. Khorumi was accompanied by instruments such as the *doli* (drum) and the *chiboni* (bagpipe).

Khorumi dance

ARMENIA: In Armenia, dance closely resembled the old traditional dances in the 18th century. Foreign invasions forced large segments of the society to move to other countries, and they brought their dances with them.

AZERBAIJAN: The old ritual dances constituted the basis of various national dances like labor (shepherds), ceremonial (ritual, wedding), common, military, sport, round, game and others.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: In the 18th century Chechens had dances with people making a large circle sitting and singing and challenging young dancers by making jumps and throwing each other down. Then they held hands and made a circle. Their songs were accompanied by oboes, bagpipes and flutes.

Questions:

- 1- What themes were most commonly incorporated in traditional dances?

Readings:

- 1- Violet on the Mountain: An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry, translated and edited by Kevin Tuite, Tbilisi: Amirani, 1994.
- 2- Ilyasov, L., *The Diversity of the Chechen Culture*, From Historical Roots to the Present, UNESCO, 2009.
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- 6- Roudik, P.L., *Culture and the Customs of the Caucasus*, Greenwood Press, 2009.

19TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA:

Georgian Ballet Theater: The Georgian Ballet Theater was opened in 1886. Vakhtang Chabukiani was the leading dancer in the theater. Chabukiani incorporated Georgian characteristics into classical ballet.

Georgian Ballet Theater



Zemkreló: The *Zemkreló* was a folk dance in Georgia. In *zemkreló*, men formed tight circles and held one another's hands. There was sometimes a second or a third line of dancers who stood on the shoulders of each other. When the speed of the dance increased, the dancers who stood on the shoulders jumped down.



Kartuli: The *Kartuli* was another folk dance that began with a man slowly walking in front of young women and inviting one of them to dance with him. While the woman slowly joined in the circle by shuffling her feet, the man followed her to get her attention.

Kartuli dance

ARMENIA: Armenian folk dances *barer* (dance with instrument) was accompanied by musical instruments like *tahul* (drum), *tar* (lute), *zourna* (oboe), *mey* (shepherd's flutes), *shvi* (whistle flute) and *daf* (tambourine), and *bari-yerker* (song-dances) were accompanied by songs like *Gadagayin Bar* and *Ey Maral Aghtchig*.

In the cities, starting in the 19th century, piano, violin, clarinet, and other European instruments accompanied the dances.

AZERBAIJAN:

Shamakhi dancers: The Shamakhi dancers were the principal dancers of the entertainment groups that existed in Shamakhi up to the late 19th century.

Shamakhi dancer

Turaji: The Azerbaijani folk female dance from the 19th century. The girls performed this dance by raising their arms depicting a flying bird.



NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: In the mid - 19th-century, in Chechnya, a mystical Sufi dance, the *zikr* (circular male dance) was introduced by the Qadiriya Sufi order.

Questions:

1- What did the introduction of classical ballet symbolize in the 19th century?

Readings:

1- Violet on the Mountain: An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry, translated and edited by Kevin Tuite, Tbilisi: Amirani, 1994.

- 2- Ilyasov, L., *The Diversity of the Chechen Culture, From Historical Roots to the Present*, UNESCO, 2009.
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 6- Roudik, P.L., *Culture and the Customs of the Caucasus*, Greenwood Press, 2009.

20TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: In 1916, the Italian dancer Maria Perini founded first private ballet studio in Georgia. The Georgian dancer Vakhtang Mikheilis dze Chabukiani was one of the graduates of this studio in 1924. In 1934, the choreographer and theorist D. Javriashvili transformed the school of Perini into the Choreographic studio.

Georgian State Dance Company (Sukhishvili Georgian National Ballet): The *Georgian State Dance Company*, the first professional state dance company that performed folk dances and toured worldwide, was founded by Iliko Sukhishvili and Nina Ramishvili in 1945.

The Georgian Folk Dance Ensemble: Nino Ramishvili and Iliko Sukhishvili became the artistic directors of this Ensemble. In Georgian folk dances, the men leap high in the air and turn, clash swords and throw daggers on the floor. The women, in contrast, dance on their toes gracefully. Khevsuruli, Davruli, Khorumi, Suliko, Khanjluri, Kartuli, Svanuri, Mtiuluri, Samaia and Acharuli are among the folk dances performed by this Ensemble.



Rustavi Ensemble: The Rustavi Ensemble was created in 1968 by Anzor Erkomaishvili. Besides polyphonic singing, they perform traditional national dances.

Rustavi Ensemble dancers performing the Khevsuruli

Vakhtang Mikheilis dze Chabukiani: Chabukiani transformed the classical ballet by including Georgian characteristics. Chabukiani was not only a choreographer, but he became the artistic director of the *Paliashvili Theatre of Opera and Ballet* (1941–1973). He became the ballet master and director of the *Tbilisi Choreographic Academy* (1950–1973). They staged the productions *Heart of the Mountains* (1941), *Sinatle* (1947), *Laurencia* (1948), *Gorda* (1950), *For Peace* (1953), *Othello* (1957), *Demon* (1961), *Bolero* (1971), *Hamlet* (1971), and *Apasionata* (1980).

ARMENIA: Traditional Armenian dances were performed with slow steps so that one could easily sing and dance simultaneously. The *barbashi* (dance leader) lead the people by facing and singing to the other dancers in the line. Dancing is always accompanied with a song, clapping of hands of spectators, and musical instruments. Dancers might perform circle, solo or couple dances.

Many dance schools were established in Armenia in the 1920s: the *Alexandropol (Gyumri) Opera-Operetta Theater Group* (1923). *St. Mkhitarian's Household Dances* and *V. Avetikyan's Rhythm and Plastic Schools* (1923-1924). V. Aristakesyan opened the *State Dance Studio* in Yerevan in 1924.

The troupe of the Opera and Ballet Theater was opened in Yerevan in 1933, and in 1934, a ballet studio was created adjacent to the theater by V. Presnyakov.

Sabre Dance: The sabre dance was a dance performed by the dancers to display their skill with sabres as in the final act of Aram Khachaturian's ballet called *Gayane* (1942).

Norayr Mehrabyan: From 1973 to 1983 he was an artistic director of the Yerevan State Choreographic School. He was also the head of the State Dance Ensemble of Armenia. Between 1984 – 1986, he was an artistic director of the National Academic State Theatre of Opera and Ballet. He also created Barekamutyun Ensemble in 1987.



Barekamutyun Ensemble: Ensemble was created in 1987 by Norayr Mehrabyan. The *Barekamutyun* performs national folk dances and dances of various nations.

Traditional Armenian Folk dance

There are other folk dance ensembles such as Berd Dance Ensemble, Karin Folk Dance Group and Geghard Armenian Folk Dance Ensemble.

AZERBAIJAN:

Kilim Arasy (Between the Rugs): During the folk dance *Kilim Arasy*, the dancer hides himself under a carpet makes gestures with his hands and his legs.

Maral Oyun (Deer Game): In *Maral oyun*, the dancer wears a deer costume and imitates the animal's movements.

Afrasiyab Badal oglu Badalbeyli: Badalbeyli wrote the first Azerbaijani ballet, *Giz Galasi* (Maiden Tower) in 1940 which was composed on the basis of national dance music, mugham and classical ballet.

Maiden Tower



He also wrote *Khalg Gazabi* (The Popular Rage) in 1941, *Nizami* in 1948 and *Soyudlar aghlamaz* (Willows Don't Cry) in 1971. He authored a book on *The Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theatre*.

The other composers Soltan Ismayil oghlu Hajibeyov who wrote second ballet *Gulshen* staged successfully at the Azerbaijan State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater in 1950; and Fikrat Amirov who wrote *Nizami* in 1947 and *Arabian Nights*, which premiered in 1979 were also valuable contributions to the history of the Azerbaijani ballet.

Ismayil Hidayetzade, Mehdi Mammadov, Adil Isgandarov, Sultan Dadashov and Firudin Safarov and conductors such as Niyazi, Ashraf Hasanov, Ahad Israfilzade, Rauf Abdullayev and Kamal Abdullayev were directors who played a important role in the development of Azerbaijani ballet.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA:

Daymohk: The Children's Dance Ensemble Daymohk consisted of 28 dancers who were chosen from school children aged 8 to 16 and five musicians from Grozny who performed as duos or solos the traditional dances of Chechnya and other Caucasian nations. The Ensemble was established by Ramzan Akhmadov.

Lovzar: Lovzar was another Chechen children's dance ensemble founded in 1983 that consisted of 30 boys and 30 girls performing traditional Chechen dances.

During the Soviet period, dance academies and choreographic institutes were established in Chechen-Ingushetia where the repertoires of the companies consisted of folkloric dances from the various nationalities in the North Caucasus.



State Folk Dance Ensemble *Vainakh*: The Chechen-Ingush State Folk Dance Ensemble was established in 1939 by Vakha Dakashev, Abdula Khamidov and Vakha Tataev. The Ensemble consisted of 15 dancers and a choir touring in different cities of the Soviet Union.

Questions:

1-Why did the Soviets support classical ballet schools and companies, but also control it so strictly?

Readings:

- 1- Violet on the Mountain: An Anthology of Georgian Folk Poetry, translated and edited by Kevin Tuite, Tbilisi: Amirani, 1994.
- 2- Ilyasov, L., *The Diversity of the Chechen Culture, From Historical Roots to the Present*, UNESCO, 2009.
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