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AZERBAIJANI DANCE CULTURE IN THE PAN-TURKIC CONTEXT

Annotation

This research examines Azerbaijani dance culture from ethnochoreographic and anthropological perspectives within the common Turkic choreographic area. The primary objective is to determine how the shared cultural identity of Turkic peoples is preserved in kinetic memory, specifically in dance plastics, and to assess the impact of geographical and social factors on this process. To this end, the dance traditions of Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Sakha (Yakuts), and Uyghurs were analyzed in terms of symbolism, structure, and ritual semantics. The findings demonstrate that the traces and semantic codes of Shamanism, Totemism, and Tengrism beliefs are clearly preserved within the traditional dance culture of Turkic peoples.

Key words: Azerbaijani dance culture, Pan-Turkic context, ritual, circular dances, Turkic peoples, dance culture.

АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНСКАЯ ТАНЦЕВАЛЬНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА В ОБЩЕТУРКСКОМ КОНТЕКСТЕ

Аннотация

В данной работе Азербайджанская танцевальная культура рассматривается с этнохореографической и антропологической точек зрения в рамках единого тюркского хореографического пространства. Основная цель исследования состоит в том, чтобы определить, каким образом общая культурная идентичность тюркских народов сохраняется в кинетической памяти, в частности в танцевальной пластике, а также оценить влияние географических и социальных факторов на этот процесс. С этой целью танцевальные традиции азербайджанцев, узбеков, казахов, киргизов, туркмен, саха (якутов) и уйгуров были проанализированы под углом зрения их символики, структуры и ритуальной семантики. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что следы и семантические коды шаманизма, тотемизма и тенгрианства четко прослеживаются в традиционной танцевальной культуре тюркских народов.

Ключевые слова: Азербайджанская танцевальная культура, общетюркский контекст, ритуал, круговые танцы, тюркские народы, танцевальная культура.

UMUMTURKIY KONTEKSTDA OZARBAYJON RAQS MADANIYATI

Annotatsiya

Ushbu tadqiqotda Ozarbayjon raqs madaniyati umumturkiy xoreografik makon doirasida etnoxoreografik va antropologik yondashuvlar asosida tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotning asosiy maqsadi turkiy xalqlarning umumiy madaniy o'zligining kinetik xotirada, xususan, raqs plastikasida saqlanish mexanizmlarini aniqlash hamda ushbu jarayonga geografik va ijtimoiy-madaniy omillarning ta'sirini baholashdan iborat. Shu maqsadda ozarbayjonlar, o'zbeklar, qozoqlar, qirg'izlar, turkmanlar, saxa (yoqutlar) va uyg'urlarning raqs an'analari ramziylik, tuzilma va ritual semantikasi nuqtai nazaridan tahlil qilindi. Olingan natijalar turkiy xalqlarning an'anaviy raqs madaniyatida shamanizm, totemizm va tangrichilik e'tiqodlarining izlari hamda semantik kodlari yaqqol saqlanib qolganligini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: Ozarbayjon raqs madaniyati, umumturkiy kontekst, ritual, doiraviy raqslar, turkiy xalqlar, raqs madaniyati.

Introduction. The commonalities unifying Turkic peoples extend far beyond a shared language family, common ancestry, historical-geographic space, similar toponyms, customs, traditions, folk crafts, and oral folklore. One of the most vivid expressions of this unity is dance culture, which serves as a key indicator of identity. Originating from daily life and human-nature interactions, folk dances reflect universal themes such as affection, freedom, love, marriage, war, heroism, and religion.

Literature review. A critical analysis of existing literature highlights the ethnochoreographic and anthropological examination of Azerbaijani dance within the Pan-Turkic context as a vital research trajectory. Grounded in cultural anthropology and semiotics, dance is conceptualized as bodily memory and a vector of socio-cultural identity across three core thematic axes:

Archaic Beliefs & Zoomorphic Symbolism: Studies on Kazakh (Ak-ku), Uyghur (meshrep), and Syr-Darya baxshi practices analyze animalistic codes, origin myths, and sacral movements (Kulsariyeva, 2023; Han, 2025; Somfai Kara,

2017). Furthermore, research on Yakut cosmological worldviews explores how ritual dances operate as a spiritual bridge between the three worlds and mediate concepts of life and death (Lukina, 2021).

Ritual Semantics & Props: Research on Uzbek prop dances and Turkmen Chaprak demonstrates how everyday objects and gestures encode cosmological concepts and ritual functions (Sayfullaeva et al., 2021; Gurbanova & Gurbanov, 2026).

Circular & Martial Typologies: Comparative works on circular forms (Yalli, Halay, Osuokhai) and martial motifs (Jangi, Zeybek, Batyrlar) highlight shared solar symbolism, directional structures, and heroic archetypes (Nabiyeva, 2018; Nussipzhanova & Mukhambetzhonov, 2024; Havilova, 2026).

While regional traditions are well-documented, a comprehensive synthesis of Azerbaijani dance culture within the broader Pan-Turkic framework remains underexplored. This study directly addresses that gap.

Research methodology. In this study, the position of Azerbaijani dance culture within the Pan-Turkic choreographic

area was analyzed comprehensively using the fundamental principles of ethnochoreography, cultural anthropology, semiotics, and comparative art history. To yield objective results, the comparative-typological analysis method was employed to identify the commonalities and differences, rhythmic structures, and spatial specifications of Azerbaijani dance plastic arts in relation to the traditional systems of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uyghur, and Sakha.

Analysis and results. Dance serves as a powerful medium that expresses the beliefs of Turkic peoples (Shamanism, Totemism, Tengrism), their unity with nature, ceremonial and festive rituals, social bonds, and spiritual values through body language. When analyzing Azerbaijani dance culture within the Pan-Turkic framework in terms of semantics, functional designation, cultural context, and choreographic structure, both commonalities and regional distinctiveness become clearly evident.

Numerous dance forms within the choreographic heritage of Turkic peoples are distinguished by martial motifs and kinetic plasticity. Heroic and martial dances, such as the Azerbaijani "Jangi", the Kazakh "Batyrlar Dance", and the Anatolian Turkish "Zeybek", share salient typological features. Specific gestures, including expansive strides, vertical extension of the arms, crouching, and circular pacing, semiotically encode heroism, collective solidarity, and the ethos of freedom, serving as vital indicators of valor within Turkic folk traditions [4].

On the other hand, an examination of Azerbaijani dance culture within the Pan-Turkic context reveals distinct characteristics. For example, a comparative analysis of Uzbek and Azerbaijani dance cultures, which both share common Turkic roots, demonstrates that while both traditions incorporate props, their variety and functional significance differ in Uzbek dance culture. In narrative dances belonging to this tradition, objects such as bowls, teapots, sharp stones, and knives directly serve as integral elements of the performance. In other dances, even when physical objects are not directly present, dance movements explicitly signify them through plastic expression to convey their underlying essence. Another divergence between the two dance cultures pertains to the executed movement vocabulary. For example, pounding and sharpening movements play a key role in the Khorezm dance school, whereas they are alien to Azerbaijani dance culture [9].

When comparing Kazakh and Kyrgyz dance cultures with Azerbaijani dance culture, one of the primary observations that draws attention is these peoples' distinct perception of dance. Notably, the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz Turks inhabiting northern Central Asia regard dance as a more sacred activity compared to other Central Asian Turkic peoples, such as the Uzbeks and Uyghurs [10]. A similar ritualistic and sacred nature is also evident in the dance traditions of Siberian Turks. Similarly, traditional Yakut dances developed from religious beliefs and shamanistic worldviews, embodying the key concepts and values cherished by the people. The significance, structure, and imagery of these dances allow them to act as a bridge between the three worlds. Thus, vertically and horizontally oriented traditional and ritual dances functioned as a model for establishing a connection between these three worlds [6].

Ritual dances are also widespread in Turkmenistan. One such dance is "Chaprak" (also referred to as "Eski-Chaprak" ["Old Chaprak"] or "Chaprak-Qarsak"), which is highly popular in the Lebap Region (southeastern region) of Turkmenistan. Translated from the Turkmen language, the word "Chaprak" means "clapping" or "applause." In ancient times, prior to the emergence of musical instruments, people

accompanied their songs and dances by clapping hands. In the archaic cosmologies of many peoples, the sun and moon were regarded as the eyes of the sky; thus, the clapping of palms against one another also bears symbolic significance [2].

A comparative-typological analysis of the Pan-Turkic choreographic area reveals the distinct dominance of the Kazakh and Uzbek dance schools in terms of the complexity and symbolic semantics of hand and finger plasticity. Particularly in Kazakh female dances, the sequence of movements conveys deep symbolic meanings, ranging from blessings to farewells, and greetings to various expressions of respect. As in Azerbaijani dance culture, hand movements play a dominant role in Kazakh female dances. However, while the primary reason for this in Azerbaijani female dances is linked to clothing culture, in Kazakh dance culture, it was predominantly dictated by spatial limitations. Indeed, the confined space of the yurt restricted the dancer from performing large-scale movements and active spatial gestures [5].

A comparative analysis of Turkic choreographic heritage reveals that structural regional variations are driven by key environmental and cultural determinants, namely geography, climate, economic lifeways, religious beliefs, and mythological worldviews.

Spanning from Eastern Europe to the Pacific and from the Arctic to the Persian Gulf, the diverse ecosystems of the Turkic world, ranging from Siberian frigid zones to Central Asian steppes and Mediterranean littoral, have dictated distinct movement dynamics. This geo-anthropological foundation shaped discrete regional traditions across Anatolia and the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Volga-Ural basin, and Siberia.

Furthermore, religious diversity has enriched their symbolic repertoire. Ultimately, despite local micro-variations, this environmental and spiritual heterogeneity reinforces the structural unity and ethno-cultural continuity of Turkic dance traditions.

From an anthropological perspective, when examining Azerbaijani dance culture within the context of Pan-Turkic dance culture, certain common motifs can be classified as follows:

The presence of dances associated with similar zoomorphic imitations.

Indeed, examining the dance culture of almost any folk around the world reveals dances named after animals or elements reflecting zoomorphic imitation.

Focusing on the Pan-Turkic context, one can observe that dances predominantly emulate birds and horses. In Azerbaijani dance culture, along with the dance named after the francolin bird ("Turaji"), the gliding technique that forms the foundation of female dances generally exhibits the imitation of a duck. Notably, as in Azerbaijani dance culture, dances reflecting bird imitations also exist in Uyghur, Turkish, and Kazakh dance traditions. For instance, Kazakh dance performers imitate geese and swans, as well as their movements during flight, landing, and bathing (in water). A key example is the female dance "Ak-ku" ("White Swan"), which is one of the ancient ritual dances. Considered a progenitor of the ancient Turks, the swan appears in numerous examples of Kazakh folklore and finds its artistic expression particularly through the ritual plasticity of dance [5].

As in Azerbaijani male dance culture, the imitation of the eagle and the horse is also observed in the male dances of other Turkic peoples. The fundamental reason for this is that dance serves as the rhythmic expression of bodily memory and daily movements. Indeed, the Turkic nomad spent a major part of their life on horseback. The galloping, swaying, rearing, prancing, and hoof-tapping of the horse were so deeply internalized

physically that even after dismounting, the individual preserved this biomechanical rhythm.

Circular Dances. Circular dances are in all probability the oldest known form of dance and have been an integral part of community life since humans first began to dance. The circular dance is an ancient tradition utilized across many cultures to mark special occasions and rituals, reinforce communal bonds, and promote unity [1].

As in many peoples of the world, circular dances are also observed among Turkic peoples. For instance, we can mention the Azerbaijani Turkic yalli/halay, Turkish halay, Bashkir circular games and dances such as "Tunarak oyunu", "Kor oyunu", "Ostaghan", "Swan", "Pigeon", and "Pheasant", Dolgan "Heyro", "Oxuokay", and "Unkuu", Yakut (Sakha) "Ohuoxay" (osuoxay), as well as Tatar circular game-dances titled "Chira ira yandiru", "Sha", "Lisva su buyları", "Yoldızım", and "Chilbir". One of the distinctive features of the circular (yalli-type) dances of Turkic peoples is that they consist of two or three parts and are performed with accompaniment [8].

In their archaic ritual context, modern circular dances originated as an expression of ancient solar worship [7]. It is essential to emphasize the significance of clockwise and counterclockwise rotation in circular rituals and ceremonies. In the cosmological perceptions of Uzbek and Kyrgyz Turks, circular rotation serves to ward off evil spirits that bring diseases to humans. According to choreographer and researcher Tamara Badmayeva, Kalmyk Turks move from left to right during the performance of circular dances; in their belief system, moving from right to left could invite misfortune. [7]. Notably, in the Yakut circular dance "Osuokhai", participants likewise move clockwise, namely from right to left [8]. In Azerbaijani Yalli dances, movement is predominantly right-to-left (counterclockwise).

Dances serve as a primary entertainment element in ceremonies.

Across the Turkic world, including Azerbaijan, one of the fundamental functions of dance is to express joy. In this regard, dances are predominantly performed during weddings, festive celebrations, and childbirth/birthday ceremonies. Among these, dance serves as a core element in the Novruz festivities celebrated by many Turkic peoples. In Novruz celebrations, which symbolize the awakening of nature and the arrival of spring, dances function both as entertainment and as deeply symbolic elements.

Alongside this, specific ceremonies belonging to certain Turkic peoples also exist. One such example is the Uyghur "meshrep" gatherings. Literally meaning "joyful gathering," this communal event combines singing, dancing, reciprocal poetic duels, and riddles [3].

The Absence of Funeral Dances in Turkic Dance Culture

One of the most distinctive features distinguishing the dance culture of Turkic peoples from other ancient cultural areas (such as Africa, Oceania, and South Asia) is the practical absence of a dance tradition within funeral rituals, except the Yakuts' "Pattern" dance [6]. In contrast to many global cultures where death is perceived as a "celebration of passage to the otherworldly realm," the Turkic worldview identifies this event as a phase of profound mourning, grief, and solemn silence. In Turkic dance philosophy, movement is regarded as the affirmation of life, the equivalent of fertility, heroism, and collective joy.

When analyzing the ritual semantics of dance culture within the Pan-Turkic context, one of the fundamental features that catches attention is the practical absence of collective danced ceremonies associated with girls' transition to biological maturity (menarche). Compared to the ethnographic landscape of many global cultures, this phenomenon constitutes a major distinguishing factor shaping the cultural-anthropological singularity of Turkic peoples.

Conclusion and Recommendations. Ethnochoreographic and comparative-typological analyses confirm that Azerbaijani dance culture is integral to the Pan-Turkic choreographic sphere. Key research findings include:

Kinetic Memory: Traces of ancient Turkic belief systems (Shamanism, Totemism, and Tengrism) remain embedded in choreographic language and ritual semantics.

Socio-Environmental Determinants: Movement dynamics are directly conditioned by geography, economic lifeways, traditional attire, and spatial constraints, such as the yurt's interior layout.

Typological Parallels and Divergences: Shared Pan-Turkic motifs (solar symbolism, zoomorphic imitations, and martial elements) alongside regional variations (prop dances and healing rites) are rigorously established.

Cultural-Anthropological Singularities: As physical motion functions as an affirmation of vitality, the structural absence of dance in funeral rites and female puberty ceremonies constitutes a distinct ethno-cultural marker.

Recommendations

To foster Pan-Turkic cultural integration and advance ethnochoreography through Digital Humanities, it is recommended to digitize endangered archaic and circular dance forms using Computer Vision and Motion Capture technologies to construct a centralized 3D kinematic database.

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