

# When Dance Turns into a Prayer

---

The Spiritual Dimension of Armenian Dances

by Gagik Ginosyan

March 26, 2022

# An Introduction on Spiritual and Traditional Culture of Armenia

Dance culture of each nation is formed in parallel with the nation's genealogy, and for ancient nations, such as Armenians the “starting point” should be dug even deeper into the culture of the tribes, clans, which stand in the basis of the nation formation. The basis of every tribe's, clan's culture are their ideas on cosmogony, cosmic hierarchical structure, their beliefs, fears towards the natural disasters, awe towards the supernatural powers, sometimes even superstitions etc. It's obvious that every human being expresses his sacred, spiritual emotions, his surprise, fear, admiration, anger through gestures, movements and facial expressions.

In every region each tribe and clan had its sanctuaries in the places of epic, heroic events, in powerful energetic areas of the region, sometimes in the rocky heights or in gorges, where special religious buildings were constructed.

The initial beliefs turned into a religion over time and people expressed their belief and awe, even allegiance to their totems, supernatural powers by spiritual, worshiping ceremonies, which very often were introduced by theatrical performances. The dance was not only an inseparable part of those performances, but very often the core point of them. Over time in each region a traditional ritual, secret ceremony has been developed to this or that god, belief, cult, sacred place and annual work cycle.





**Trndez** is one of those secret ceremonies and was related to Armenian **God of War Vahagn**. People used to make fire and jump over it. By making the pile of fire, people expressed their worship to fire, which indeed was a remaining of the Sun worship era.

There were also other ceremonies related to the annual fertility cycle, where Dance again had a core feature of harmonizing the movements, music, spells and the whole structured ceremony of this or that ritual.

Several unique dances have withstood the time up to nowadays, which are some kind of sacrificial act to this or that secret ritual ceremony, and by their performance the whole belief system and rituals are summarized, completed.

It's obvious that a celebration like Trndez, which is directly related with the cosmic luminaires, to be more precise with the Sun, it's earthly reflection finds in the fire's purifying, bactericidal self, while the secret ritual aspect is to purify the fertile uterus, contribute to the creation act and hallow the future child. Similar hallowing meaning also had the dances around the fire pile. They were very important spiritual cleansing and for creating a collective spiritual mindset in the community. Little bit different and in some point of view similar ceremonies have been held for the annual life cycle too, mainly: in spring for fertility, in autumn for good harvest etc.



Obviously the beliefs of the different tribes and clans of the Armenian nation have been mixed and resulted in united rituals, gods and beliefs, though each tribe has also maintained its specific intra-tribal beliefs and rituals. Each of the tribes had their pagan mythology, which was created based on their ancestor totems, nature and different phenomena reflected in various worships, that also had theatrical performances.

Ritual Dance had its own important role in the process of cosmogony ceremony. Its formula and cumulative structure samples with their spells and movements have reached to the Middle Ages and even up to the 20th century from the prehistoric times.

The vertical cosmogony is described in those dances, in dance steps and especially in the dance songs: starting from the bottom of the sea and rising up to the Sun. The Process of creation starts in the bottom of the sea, moves up to the ship on the sea, then to the cross on it, to the tree, tree branch, nest on the branch, eag in the nest, chicken on the eag and the Sun over that all.



Another very important interpretation had the worship of gods of death and resurrection in the Armenian dances, and that's typical to almost all regions of Armenia. There are different very interesting interpretations of this phenomenon in the traditional dance sample **Gorani**, which was widely spread in all over the Armenian Highlands, and every region had its own dancing manner.

- In one region it was related to a social tragedy, very often to drought and to the **water god dragon** or big water snake, who was angry with humans, because of their sins. According to the legend the angry Dragon blocked the sky, which was the symbol of male origin, its fertility power, and didn't let the fertilizing seed - rain pour on the earth (mother land), which was the symbol of female origin. With the help of Gorani, the people used to copy, replicate the movements of the Snake - lord of the waters, to flatter him and convince to unblock, to untie the sky.
- In another region the same dance was related to the process of planting, when the seeds are "killed" by being put in the soil, in order they can turn into a harvest, which is the death and resurrection symbolism.





# History of Armenian Dances and Their Sacred Dimension

Our ancestors were convinced that the Armenian gods live in the sky and the demons - in the underworld. This statement resulted in the core point of Armenian dances' movement system. The basis of the Armenian Dances are **the vertical springs**. There was a very important idea beyond the movement itself: to lift up the body, and with body to raise the soul to god.



Despite the fundamental religious changes that took place, from totemism to Pagan era, and later to Christian era, when very core idealistic changes happened, the Armenian dance philosophy did not change at all. While in most European countries Renaissance deeply affected the culture, it failed to make serious changes in the Armenian one, especially in the Dance.





The Prophet of Armenian culture **Komitas** said: “The traditional dances has lived in us since pagan days up to nowadays, while they are lost in French and German people. One can also see religious traces in the traditional or secular dances”.



It is well known fact that the Renaissance began in the Armenian Highlands 1-2 centuries before than in Europe, and the best evidence of it is the architecture of the Armenian capital **Ani**, during the Bagratuni kingdom, created by the great architect Trdat. Similar evidence in the literature is the masterpiece “**Narek**” written by the Armenian greatest mind of 10-11th centuries **Grigor Narekatsi**, who was called cosmic monk by the Catholic church. Even though the Renaissance era had begun earlier in Armenia it failed to lead to human-centric reflection of the emotions, world, as it did in Europe.





We differentiate **3 types of springs** in the Armenian dances: springs with knee bending, springs with toes and jumps.



If we talk about the awe towards the Armenian gods, and in later Christian era towards the God, expressed by vertical springs and jumps, then we should also mention our rebel against the demonic powers as well.





In Armenian dances we have a separate layer of so-called **“Charkhapan parer”** - “Evil beating dances”. The process of beating, cheating the demonic, evil powers were expressed by hitting movements with feet, especially with heels, upon the ground, claps, tangled steps and body bendings etc. They were the simulation of hitting the demon's head to keep the evil away from us. Here we should mention a dance called **“Papuri”**. The name origin comes from the old Armenian (called Grabar) word *“papara”*, and has nothing to do with the word “popuri”, which means a melody mix of several dances. The word *“papara”* meant to beat, to hit, to break, to destroy, to humiliate etc. There was a belief that from time to time we should beat, hit the demons and not let them interfere in our lives.



Another very important point worth to be mentioned about the Armenian dances is that, the overwhelming majority of them are **roundelays**, which were to be danced in closed circle ONLY. The origin of the roundelay or circle comes from the Sun disk symbolism. Though there was also Lunar symbolism and there were dances with semicircles, in the Armenian dances the majority of the dances are roundelays with closed circles and the circle was not only the symbol of Sun but also the Circle of Life.

The best evidence of the sacred dimension's existence in the Armenian traditional dances is the dance called **Ejmiatsin**. It comes from Karin town, which is situated in Erzurum region of Western Armenia. The origin of this dance goes back to the totemism era despite its name, as it was renamed in Christian era and the original name is lost. The symbolism of the dance has also changed. The same happened to many other pagan and totemic rituals, ceremonies and beliefs.



“Ejmiatsin” dance comes from the Sun worship era and passing through many centuries has gone through various transformations and been renamed after the symbol of the Armenian Apostolic church Holy Ejmiatsin Cathedral. Its symbolism has been also transformed and adopted to the new religion, Christianity.



The Sun worship symbolism in the dance is expressed by the manner of the dancers holding each other's hands and the time the dance was performed. Mainly it was performed outdoors, facing the Sunrise. The dancers used to stand on high mountains and as soon as the Sun rose, they'd raise their hands and start the dance. They'd raise their hands above shoulders, which was a manner of glorifying the Sun.

Another very important thing is that the dance is formed by 3 parts and each of them has its unique antique symbolism. Despite gaining new explanations during the Christian era, the original sacred dimension and cosmic symbolism of the dance has withstood and reached us.





In the 1st part, as we have already mentioned, the hands are held up glorifying the Sun and dance steps are made towards right and diagonally forward, then left and diagonally back, which results in making the dance circle getting narrower than wider. The meaning of this part is the following: the Sun goes up during the day and moves towards the Sunset on the West, which is expressed by the dance movement to the right and during the night the Sun moves towards the Sunrise place in the East, being expressed by the movement to the left. The important point here is that the Sunset and the Sunrise process was related to the death and resurrection worship in the old Armenian tradition. Every evening the Sun dies and reborns every morning. Meantime moving to right and left the dancers also bow, which not only has the honoring meaning towards the cosmic mayor luminaire, but also when dancers bow their hands move out of the dance circle and symbolize the Sun rays.

In the 2nd part the dance circle moves to the right, then to the left with 6 pairs of steps. In totemic era it has the meaning of ascending duration, when the Sun is present in the sky during January - June months. The duration between Sunrise and Sunset gets longer and the ascendance stops on the 6th month. Correspondingly, the dance right movement also stops on the 6th step. The bowing body stands and the hands are raised above the head again. The 6th step symbolizes the June solstice. As the dance circle has moved 6 pairs of steps to the right, it should move another 6 pairs to the left. On the 6th left step the circle stops and the hands are raised again

The 6 steps (both to right and left directions) not only symbolize the 6 months, but also the 6 zodiacs among which the Earth moves and the days get longer then shorter.

The 3rd part is performed via 4 pairs of right and left moves standing almost in the same place. They symbolize the 4 day and nights (right and left moves correspondingly) in December solstice, when the duration of the day is the shortest in the year. People call it the time when “the Sun is gone to its Mother’s”, or “the Sun is dead” or “the Sun is set and should rise, born soon”. These movements symbolize the labor pains of the Sun and after the 4th pair moves, the dance restarts. The restart announces the birth of the Sun on December 25th, which was the day of God Mihr in Armenian mythology. The only pagan temple in Garni that has reached our days is dedicated to him.





All these symbols are very remarkable and it is very important for us to analyze their sacred, spiritual aspect in a correct way and to discover how they transformed to have Christian interpretation.

The first part of the dances, which has bows and steps moving forward and to right, making the dance circle smaller, is interpreted as a movement towards the altar of the church, and the bows are done in front of the Jesus Christ icon.

The 6 pairs of steps to right and to left in the 2nd part of the dance are interpreted as a gesture of awe towards the 12 apostles. We should also note that there are churches in Armenia that have icons of Jesus Christ and St. Mary on the altar, accompanied by icons of 12 apostles, 6 on each side of the altar.



The last part of the dance, which has 4 right and 4 left steps, according to Christian interpretation, is the symbol of abstinence both material and spiritual for several weeks before one of the most important Christian festival Easter, when people wait for Jesus Christ's resurrection. In Armenian Easter is Zatik, and according to Christian interpretation it carries the symbol of separating (zatel in Armenian) soul from the body, but the word itself has an older origin. The word's pre-Christian interpretation is again the separation, but in this case the dead nature from the resurrected one, which means the separation of spring from the winter. During the abstinence the altars in Armenian churches are closed/covered and no ceremonies are held. The relatively passive movements of the 3rd part symbolize this very period, after which the dance is restarted symbolizing the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.



The way the hand are held above the head in the closed dance circle, which was a pagan Sun worship symbol, during the Christian era it was the symbol of Armenian Apostolic Church dome, the act of church's central dome creation. We should admit that this is a unique hand holding manner, as it was not allowed to show off especially women's underarms.

It's certain that the interpretation of the dance during the Sun worshiping, totemic era, has gained its corresponding sacred Christian reformation and new interpretation, as well as many other Armenian traditional pagan festivals like Trndez, Vardavar etc. They all has gained Christian interpretation, were renamed and were converted into Armenian Apostolic Holy Church festivals, some even are included into the list of the most important ones.





Break :)





# Issues Related to Cultural Politics in Soviet Union Period

The Soviet Union was a big machine that had a very bad influence on all nations living on its territory, no matter big or small and all religious groups. Before coming to the SU horrible influence on Armenian culture and especially on the Dance, we should note that it was only another ring in the chain of disasters, which had begun in the dawn of Christianity. Influenced by Christianity many traditions and rituals have been changed. As Armenia was the first to adopt Christianity as state religion, its culture and especially Dance suffered most. Coming to more “visible” times for us, we need to draw your attention on the fact that because of the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire at the end of 19th century up to beginning of the 20th, where 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered, thousands of Armenians had to leave Western Armenia and were spread all over the world. That had a terrible effect on the Armenian culture, especially Dance, many samples were lost or distorted.

Talking about the SU policy of destroying cultures and nations, we should draw your attention on the fact that the national cultural independence, national self were being destroyed and anyone who was trying to keep and save national culture was put in jail or was chased by the SU agents. Soviet society preached atheism, was against anything that was related to any kind of religion. They even were ruining churches and killing the priests.



Within the artificial “Soviet choreographic school” walls dance culture of all nations was smashed. There were dances created with artificially created movements combined with semi-classic ones and with semi-national outfits. The Soviet era was also a disaster for all the symbolic artifacts that were used on our original traditional outfit. They destroyed all the mysticism covering it with the idea of making the outfits more beautiful and esthetic for stage performances. Recognizing that it’s not an easy task to make a whole nation deny its own culture, that has a history of many thousand years, they not only created artificial dance clubs, that had state status, were financially supported by the soviet government, got free outfit etc, also they started mocking the national culture, calling it dirty, dungy and dance of villagers. They also mock the sacred dances performed in the temples, trying to inject ignorance and hatred towards their own culture, and through culture to their own selves.

The dance groups of Soviet choreographic schools, performing dances with false origin, were called “Armenian National Dance Groups”, when the original, real Armenian national culture, that was still alive in the countries and villages, was called Ethnographic or Folk.



Within the artificial “Soviet choreographic school” walls dance culture of all nations was smashed. There were dances created with artificially created movements combined with semi-classic ones and with semi-national outfits. The Soviet era was also a disaster for all the symbolic artifacts that were used on our original traditional outfit. They destroyed all the mysticism covering it with the idea of making the outfits more beautiful and esthetic for stage performances. Recognizing that it’s not an easy task to make a whole nation deny its own culture, that has a history of many thousand years, they not only created artificial dance clubs, that had state status, were financially supported by the soviet government, got free outfit etc, also they started mocking the national culture, calling it dirty, dungy and dance of villagers. They also mock the sacred dances performed in the temples, trying to inject ignorance and hatred towards their own culture, and through culture to their own selves.

The dance groups of Soviet choreographic schools, performing dances with false origin, were called “Armenian National Dance Groups”, when the original, real Armenian national culture, that was still alive in the countries and villages, was called                                      Ethnographic                                      or                                      Folk.



The Dance master of those pseudo-dance schools was able to perfectly learn Moldova, Georgian or dance of any other nation in only 1-2 weeks, but that very dance master even spending 2-3 months would not be able to really learn at least 1 original, national, pure traditional Armenian dance.

Komitas said: “The Dance reflects the main characteristics of each nation, especially its level of morality and civilization”. That is why the dance culture was destroyed on the way of creating the pseudo-nation, the one whole soviet nation.

The Soviet Union also tried to make all nations living on its territory use one alphabet, which should have been Russian kirillitsa. But they were not able to stand against the Armenian rebell, and then they forced the soviet, so called new orthography, reasoning it with the aim of getting rid of illiteracy. The classic orthography of Mashtots was changed, simplified, which deformed the whole Armenian language and literature, and as an outcome - the Armenian mind and ethnic self.





The same game was played with the ethnic dance and for so called dance education many dance clubs were opened in villages and towns to impose soviet dance culture, that still spoils the ethnic culture, even though the client - the Soviet Union is dead for already 30 years. There are 3 state dance groups in Armenia, meanwhile there is no ethnic state dance group. In the Dance College as well as in the Dance department of the Pedagogical University the students learn classic and so called national dance, which is the remains of the Soviet Choreographic school. Despite our struggles for 20 years no real education center has been created that teaches traditional culture.

In the 60ths Armenian greatest minds rebelled against the dances with typical soviet themes, like Dance of the workers with aluminum or Dance about kolkhoznik lover etc. They rebelled against these senseless dance samples claiming that Armenian dance culture is blocked: “One looks at the Armenian dance and does not understand if that is a dance, a ballet, gymnastics or a circus performance”.



During the Soviet Union era all representatives of the so called national dance were praised with state medals, while the best representatives of the ethnic song and dance were chased and imprisoned.

Even the founder of the Armenian Ethnic Dance Science Srбуhi Lisitsyan, who was the one, who created the Dance recording system - kinetography in all over the Soviet Union, was not able to escape those repressions. Trying to interrupt her work or at least trying to distract from the national aspect, her son was imprisoned with a fabricated charge, was claimed an enemy of the nation and then killed.



# Issues related to globalization

Seems after the SU collapse, its influence on the national culture had disappeared and it was possible to reconstruct the core national culture, national spiritual system of values, everything that SU had destroyed. Especially the fact that Armenia regained its independence and the society that regained its at first glance National statehood and independence, should have returned to its real, pure culture, which indeed contributed to the regaining process, as the national, traditional songs and war-dances had a very big impact during the meetings for Artsakh issue and Independence. Seemed it was high time for the traditional culture to be reconstructed, but another disaster came up, when the Iron Curtains were dropped the post soviet region was invaded by the globalization anti-cultural influence and the soap operas, low quality songs, dances, as well as the sects disrupted the possible treatment process.

Very often the traditional Armenian culture stayed in a detached state, so did the Dance. The dancers of the pop-singers, performing their low quality, soulless movements, often expressing sexual imitation did a lot of harm to the Armenian traditional culture and to the aspiration of the Armenians to go back to their original selves.

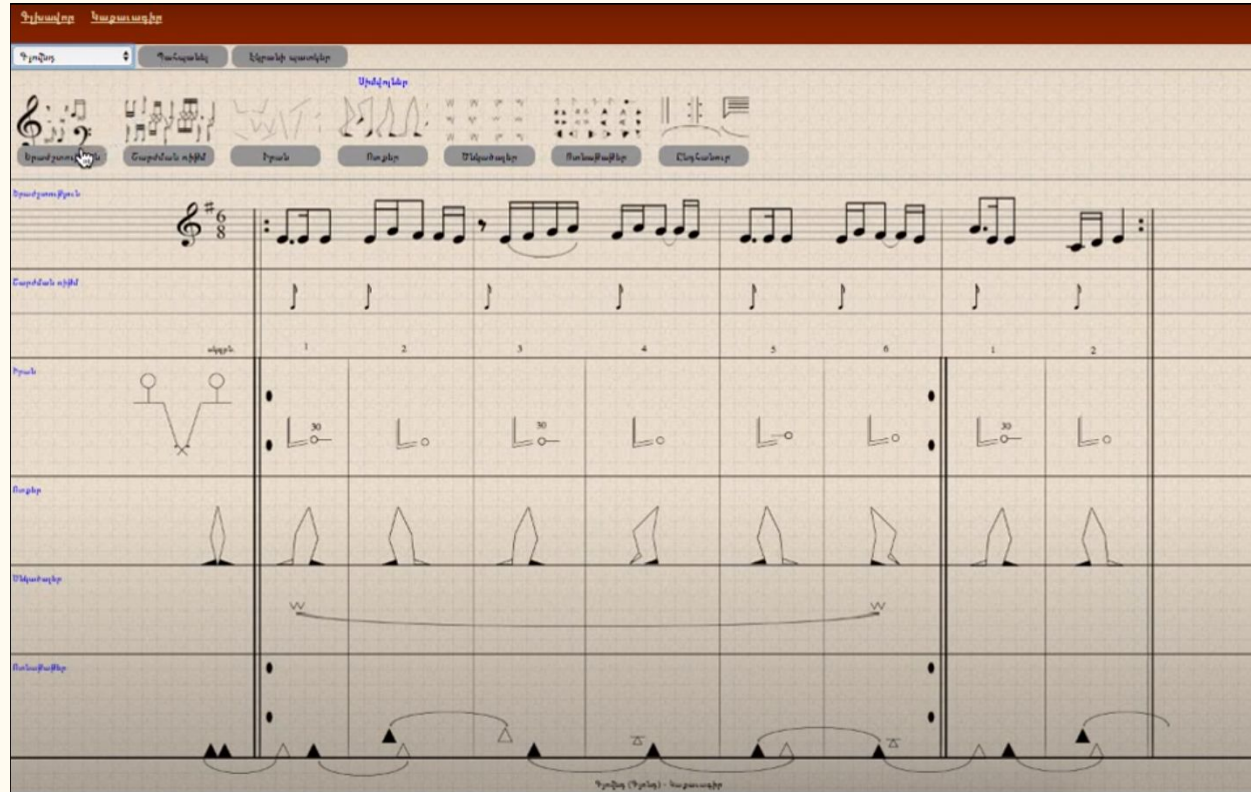
Globalization continued the destructive policy of the SU towards the traditional dance, though with different methods, and highlighting different objectives. It seems it still continues that way.

With its low quality and egocentric culture globalization led to migrations, low-paid employment etc. That is why globalization has harmed the traditional culture a lot too and everyone, who realizes the role of the traditional culture and understands that traditional song and dance culture is a cornerstone in the process of having proper development of the new generation and countries based on real values, should pay a lot of attention to this fact.



# Perspectives, Researches, Actions, Viewpoints

In order to properly record the traditional dance and transfer it to future generations, we have created a Kinetography application, on the basis of the only dance recording system created in the Soviet Union by Srбуhi Lisitsyan. We called it “Kaqavagir”, as in old Armenian (Grabar) the verb “kaqavel” was the synonym of the words “to dance”, and “gir”, “grel” is the Armenian version of the word “graphy”, “graphya”. This application gives us the opportunity to easily record the dances, as well as to modernize the methods of dance maintenance.





Nowadays, that traditional culture and especially the samples, having sacred dimension, are injured and are in danger, having in mind Komitas's words, we should notice especially after the latest war broken up by Azerbaijan and Turkey, one of the strongest impact on the resurrection of the national spirit may have been the national dance. For that very reason we should spread and announce those sacred values that are hidden in the Armenian traditional dance, continue to inject the "National Songs and Dances" subject into the schools, hold events and festivals, where traditional dances are performed. Parallel to this we should increase the scientific factor, make it possible for the nation to learn about the origin, meaning and regional specifics of every dance. And the most important thing is to return the traditional culture to our everyday lives, to our wedding parties and other events.

To make this happen, we should rejoin the scientific basis and the performance of the dances, which were splitted during the SU era. The performed dance will gain scientific background, proof for being of Armenian origin and the huge sacred powers will help in regaining the sacred national self-recognition. The science will get the chance to be performed, and a way to show the original Armenian culture not only in local and but also in foreign stages and help to regain the pure national characteristics.





The End :)

