

New expressions, old beliefs

Finding wisdom, grace and power in Armenian folk dances

Shakeh Major Tchilingirian

“There is dance in all of life,” writes Komitas (1869-1935), the famed priest musicologist and founder of Armenian national school of music. Indeed, dance has always been part of humanity as significant ritual, ceremonial, communal and social meaning-transmitter and cultural expression. Komitas explains that “the spirit of national music is the aggregate of patterns that a nation instinctively employs in singing” and dancing. It is the song and dance that “are immediate, non-artificial,” which are “intrinsic reflections of the internal and external life of the folk.”

Besides their ritual, folk and artistic dimensions, Armenian dances transmit human values and beliefs. In the past, they reflected the social-cultural context of peasants and enforced connections with everyday life, rituals and traditions. Singing and dancing, as Komitas puts it, “is routine” for the peasant “as bread and water.” As such, Armenian folk dances, like other cultures, provide us a vast meaning system, which enrich our lives today.

It is this enriching aspect that I aim to highlight through Armenian folk dances, both through workshops and through performances. Dancing Armenian dances is a communal experience as the ritual brings together people from all walks of life into a “circle of life.” It bonds people together living on the same earth and reconnects them with the deep roots that go back to time immemorial.

The life we live is a prayer expressed through dance. For this understanding you don't need to be Armenian — or any nationality — just human. This is something that is paramount to my own sense of self, my sense of identity not just as an Armenian but as a human being. The fact that these Armenian dances have been passed on as a legacy connects me to a timeless existence and understanding of this wisdom and being able to share these gems makes me feel richer and more connected to what I believe to be the essence of life and humanity.

We need to find the “dance” in all of our lives. This is the key purpose of my dance retreats and workshops. I feel a call to create opportunities to keep these meanings alive and share them with a wide circle of people. Even as our societies are becoming increasingly inward looking, individualistic and disengaged, today, more than ever, we need to reconnect with our deep and common roots that nourish us with human wisdom and spiritual strength. I am not alone in this perception and experience. Indeed, we have had these customs for thousands of years, like the “Muron” (chrism) used to anoint infants during baptism in the Armenian Church that goes back to 1700 years. Likewise, I envisage the dances we dance today to have “nano particles” in them that connect us to the wisdom that lies in our heritage.

There are over a dozen types of Armenian folk dances, among them wedding dances, battle dances, mourning dances, harvest dances, work dances (for example, yoghurt making,

carpet weaving, bread making dances), so on. Dance steps, forms and movements convey a wide range of meanings: for instance, *Kocharis* (the mystical goat/ram), *Goranis* (danced to songs of lost love and lost land from Moush/Taron in historic homeland), *Lorkes*, imitating the quail (variations of which are also danced by Kurds and Turks), *Govnds*, *Papouris* (variations danced by Kurds), etc.

In the past, these dances were danced at appropriate times and spaces by peasants. The themes were relevant to their daily work in the fields or at home or were connected to particular occasions in the life of the family or community. Today, however, these dances are danced in different contexts and events than in the past. They are danced — most often to recorded music — spontaneously, on social occasions or during organised public festivities. Occasions are initiated by a dance “leader” — sometimes accompanied by live music — whereby everyone joins in. Such rituals are opportunities for those present who know the dance and others who learn ‘on the spot’. The power of these dances go beyond celebrations and social events. Dancing at large public demonstrations or political protests has become a ‘new’ expression of collective strength and defiance.

My personal link with this legacy of strength in unity and coming together is amplified with a sense of a connection with a higher spiritual power, which nature so powerfully embodies. Indeed, I find the profound thoughts of Komitas very inspiring: “Attend the school of Nature: open your mind and read its sea-vast mind, of which the talent that the Creator has placed in you is a droplet; open your heart and let there echo its mysterious and secret voices, for, in its endless valley, your heart too is a small hollow, given to you from above, therein to store noble feelings.... The phenomena of Nature are forever astir: it is Life which is not possible to contain with lifeless letters and sounds, pens and hoes, brushes and rulers. It resembles the dawn, always fresh, always new, always life-giving, always mother to the creative mind and heart, and always simple.”

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