Ethnographic and socio-cultural characteristics of georgian national dances: Historicity, ritual, and dynamics

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Abstract. This academic article provides a systematic analysis of the origins, ethnographical nature, mythological and ritual roots, and socio-cultural functions of Georgian national dances. Georgian folk dances are not merely a collection of aesthetic movements; rather, they serve as a complex cultural code reflecting the centuries-old history, martial spirit, gender relations, and religious-mythological worldview of the nation. Through the study of characteristic dances such as Khorumi, Kintoauri, Samaia, and Kartuli, this paper highlights the semantics of choreographic movements and their role in shaping national identity.
Keywords: Georgian dances, ethnochoreography, Khorumi, Kartuli, ritual, choreographic semantics, national identity, Caucasian culture, polyphony. Introduction
The choreographic art of any nation is inextricably linked to its historical formation, geographical location, and collective psyche. Georgian national dances hold a special place in the global intangible cultural heritage due to their sharp dynamics, metric complexity, and high level of technical mastery. The territory of Georgia (the Caucasus region) has historically been an area where various civilizations clashed, forcing the population to live in a constant state of defense and martial readiness. This environment directly influenced and shaped their dance art.
The relevance of this study lies in the fact that in the era of globalization, the transformation of national dances and the preservation of their unique archaic features represent central issues in international ethnochoreology. The purpose of this article is to establish a genre classification of Georgian folk dances, to reveal the symbolism within their system of movements, and to scientifically justify their cultural-anthropological aspects.
1. Historical Roots and Ritual Nature of Georgian Ethnochoreology
The origin of Georgian dances dates back to prehistoric times, specifically to the eras of paganism and the worship of natural forces. Archaeological excavations in the Trialeti and Kazbegi regions uncovered bronze-age artifacts depicting human figures performing hunting and ritual dances.
The fundamental basis of Georgian dance culture is the syncretism of rhythm and movement. In ancient times, dance was not merely a means of entertainment, but fulfilled vital social and spiritual functions. It was used as a ritual before hunting to ensure good luck (such as the Berdika ritual dance), a ceremony to pray for a fertile harvest, and a psychological tool to raise the spirits of warriors on the battlefield.
The official adoption of Christianity in Georgia during the 4th century did not completely eliminate pagan rituals. Instead, it adapted them into a new religious framework. For example, pagan ideas of fertility were seamlessly integrated into the festivals dedicated to Christian saints.
2. Genre and Regional Classification of Georgian Dances
The geographical division of Georgia into mountainous and lowland regions led to the formation of distinctly different dance traditions. The dances of the mountainous regions (such as Khevsureti, Svaneti, and Tusheti) are characterized by sharp, aggressive movements filled with high jumps and simulated combat. In contrast, the lowland and urban dance cultures (such as Tbilisi and Kutaisi) feature smoother, more lyrical, and highly theatricalized elements.
2.1. "Khorumi" – The Semantics of a Military-Strategic Dance
Originating in the region of Adjara, the Khorumi dance perfectly expresses the military past of the Georgian people through choreographic language. This dance is traditionally performed exclusively by men and structurally consists of several distinct phases:

1. The Scout Movement: A small group of dancers simulates military reconnaissance, carefully scanning enemy territory.
2. The Attack and Combat: Sharp, highly synchronized movements that reflect corporate unity and brotherhood.
3. The Victory: A grand, triumphant finale celebrating the warriors' success.
The musical meter of Khorumi is exceptionally complex, relying heavily on a 5/8 asymmetric time signature. This rhythm demands an extraordinary level of internal concentration, timing, and bodily control from the dancers.
2.2. "Kartuli" – The Codification of Gender Relations and Aristocracy
Kartuli represents the pinnacle of Georgian folk choreography and is the traditional wedding dance. It maintains a strict code of etiquette and gender boundaries. The symbolism of the dance is defined by two contrasting performance styles:
* The Male Movement: It embodies strength, fortitude, and most importantly, utmost self-control. Throughout the performance, the male dancer must never touch the woman or violate her personal space. His eyes remain fixed entirely on her.
* The Female Movement: It embodies grace, elegance, and serene tranquility. The female dancer moves so smoothly that she appears to slide like a swan on water (a technique known as motsurave). Her gaze is directed downward, symbolizing modesty and virtue.
In Kartuli, standing and moving on the tips of the toes (similar to the pointe effect in ballet) is a core technical requirement for men, creating a high level of dynamic balance in the choreography.
2.3. "Samaia" – Trinitarianism and the Glorification of Monarchy
While the roots of the Samaia dance trace back to ancient pagan times honoring the "Trinity" deities (the Moon, the Sun, and the Stars), it evolved during the Middle Ages into a grand anthem dedicated to the great ruler of the Kingdom of Georgia, Queen Tamar (Tamar Mepe).
The dance is performed by three women. The choreographic patterns are dominated by restraint, fluid arm movements, and prayer-like postures. This dance vividly resembles the coming to life of medieval Georgian frescoes and murals.
3. Dance Technique and the Semantics of Costumes
The unique visual language of Georgian dances is deeply intertwined with its traditional clothing and specific technical elements.
3.1. Chokha – The Semantic Value of the Male Attire
The Chokha, the traditional male garment, is far more than just clothing; it is a profound symbol of military and social status. The gazyars (special breast pockets originally designed to hold ammunition cartridges) structurally reinforce the posture, ensuring the dancer keeps a strictly erect and rigid frame during performance. The long, wide pleats of the coat create an aerodynamic sense of space during rapid turns and spins.
3.2. The Phenomenon of Dancing on the Toes
In the world of choreography, outside of classical ballet, it is almost exclusively in Caucasian (and particularly Georgian) folk dances that male dancers perform directly on the tips of their toes while wearing soft leather boots (resembling ichigi). This extraordinary feature is explained by two factors: the practical skill required to navigate steep, rocky mountainous terrain, and the artistic technique of shifting the body's center of gravity to a minimal point to achieve maximum rotation speed.
4. Music and Rhythm: Polyphony and Convergence
Georgian dances exist in complete synchronization with the nation’s traditional folk polyphony (multi-voiced singing). The primary musical instruments accompanying the dances include:
* The Doli: A percussion instrument that establishes the rhythmic skeleton of the movements.
* The Garmoni and Panduri: Accordion and stringed instruments that weave the primary melodic lines.
The rhythm is often highly syncopated, featuring unexpected stops and shifting accents. This requires the performers to possess an incredibly refined, innate sense of metrorhythmic awareness.

Conclusion

A systematic study of Georgian national dances leads to the following academic conclusions:

1. Historical-Cultural Continuity: Georgian dances have successfully preserved their ritualistic and mythological archetypes from antiquity to the modern era.
2. Rigidity of Gender Roles: The strict division of male and female roles in dances like Kartuli or Khevsuruli perfectly models the traditional social structure and strict rules of etiquette of Georgian society through choreography.
3. Political and Identificational Function: Both during the Soviet era and the years of independence, the national ballet companies founded by choreographers like Iliko Sukhishvili and Nino Ramishvili served as crucial instruments of cultural diplomacy, showcasing the Georgian people's ideals of freedom and independence to the world.

Preserving these ethnochoreological elements on a scientific basis, while adapting them to modern stage requirements, remains the primary condition for successfully passing this intangible cultural heritage down to future generations.

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