

Representations of Gender in the Lezginka – A plural imaginary of the Caucasus.

Originally from the North Caucasus, the Lezginka dance helped to convey a representation of the peoples of this region between Ottoman and Slav cultures. This region of secular conflicts has trained formidable warriors. Subsequently, the whole dynamic of the lezginka is turned towards this fighting corporeality. The spatial schema denotes the linear and circular figures of conquests. They mark positions referring to military figures, accentuated by traditional clothes and sometimes by wearing knives. As for movements, they are most often dry and split. The hands take two definite forms: either a firm fist or fingers well apart; representing hands of attacks. The movements of the legs outline the actions that the combatants perform. Such a gesture develops a virile, sometimes aggressive energy and refers to the courage and strength of men ... In contrast to the dance of men, often intense and accentuated by percussion, that of women is characterized by lightness and grace. The outfit is air: a long veil on the hair, a long dress leaving nothing, long braided hair (a girl is represented by apparent braids while a married woman has her hair hidden behind a veil). The whole dance of the woman is focused on the arms waving in different ways and on the wearing of head.

The name of this dance is etymologically rooted "LezGINE". Until the Russian Revolution, the Russian Empire will use "lezGINE" as a term applied to all ethnic groups living in the current Russian republic of Dagestan. The lezginka dance would at first sight be related to the Caucasus which is "Country of the mountains"; since Dag means "mountain" in Turkish and stan "country" or "kingdom" in Persian. The Caucasus is also the name given to a mountain range between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea¹. This territory is today inhabited by about forty ethnic groups, each speaking its own language and maintaining its own social rites. This is how the LezGINE people became one of the ethnic groups of the Republic of Dagestan. Ethnological history closely links the LezGINE people to one of the oldest ancient kingdoms on the territory of the Caucasus: Caucasian Albania². One of the ethnic groups was the Lakm - ancestors of present lezgines, who lived in the Eastern Caucasus. In the same geographical area, the Arab peoples defined as early as the 9th century a Lakz people with their own language and culture³. Note also the existence of another older ethnic group that could be related to the terminology of dance: the Lak people; a people that

1 The Caucasus is divided into two main regions: the South Caucasus (also called Transcaucasia) includes 3 independent countries: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; and the North Caucasus (called Ciscaucasia) includes several autonomous regions of the Russian Federation: Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, ...

2 According to Strabo, a Greek geographer (64 BC - 24 AD), Caucasian Albania was founded at the end of the 4th century BC. J.C. on the present territory of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Dagestan..

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Martin Haspelmath : « A grammar of Lezgian », Walter de Gruyter, 1993

exists in Iran but where the lezginka is not danced, or at least not studied until today. It is in this shifting region, constantly invaded (Turkish, Arab, Mongolian, Russian) that the image of the Lezginka has developed. Despite troubled origins, it is possible to trace the evolution of feminine and masculine representations in this ancient dance by focusing on certain movements. Here, the study will focus on the historical evolution of walking and laps on the knees. This focus will allow us to question ourselves about the representations of gender in dances from traditional cultures, that is to say post-industrial: what are they based on? What do they become during today's performances? This study could be a key to understanding the place of so-called "traditional", "folkloric" or even "exotic" dances in today's world: why are some dances from ancient cultures still alive and others dead? Can it be linked to a change in gender relations? Is the dimension "other"⁴ of a dance measured by the gesture or the message?

The first performances of the Lezginka show an action dance of a strong and combative man where the woman accompanies him with his grace and sensitivity. These features are reflected in the walk. Indeed, several variants of men's steps are possible but all are dry, anchored to the ground with an accent at the bottom. The skeleton of the walk is the following: right foot forward, left foot just put the tip next to the right forefoot and leave with the left foot, right tip, and so on. The steps are small. Another variant exists, it gives more amplitude to the movement: right foot forward, left foot is slipped behind the right front foot and hunting to redo move the right foot and start all over again on the left. This variant is softer but still martial. It refers to the image of the warrior sneaking between the narrow paths of the Caucasus mountains quickly and quietly, one step ahead of the other. There are usually two possible entries in the dance; either by walking or by a spectacular movement such as a jump. The jump is often followed by a pose to mark the entrance and resumed by walking. It refers to the surprise attack of the warriors and the complex movements between stones and bushes. As for walking very down to earth, it refers to prudence and discretion. His technical evolution has developed the famous walk on the toes of feet (toes folded). If the march of men is often thick and compact accompanied by percussion, that of women are characterized by lightness. In the same way as in men walk, there are generally two variants of female steps: one is identical to that of the man; slide one foot behind the other. The second is a simple step followed, one foot after the other, on a slight half-point. These two qualities of steps are performed continuously so that the viewer must believe that the dancers slide. No accent or change

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I call here "dimension other", anything that looks at a place or time other than the "now and here" of the viewer. Therefore, all traditional, folkloric or exotic dances have a different dimension in them; since traditional reverts to the pre-industrial world, folklore is the study, science, knowledge of a people and exotic, means representations pictured outside oneself (from the late Greek exo-"outside", exōtikos "foreign, outside ")

of level should be felt. Everything is done to intensify the ethereal image of women. Furthermore, no physical contact is established between the two sexes, each continues its repertoire under the same musical rhythm with opposing qualities of movement. The only time the physical contact takes place is when traveling in pairs when the man holds the wrist of the woman to take him to another place. This traditional representation is based on fairly obvious social and religious distinctions of this region but not always accurate in relation to the reality experienced by the Caucasian peoples. Petipa, an essential reference as choreographer in academic dance, has created, with the aim of representing the Caucasus region, women with visible navels with movements of wave and vibration of the pelvis, bust and arms; often in attitudes of submission and sensuality. This representation of the Caucasian woman has often been confused with that of the Eastern woman. Conversely, the very dynamic sequences of male dances have been assimilated and disseminated by Western and Russian theatrical institutions as "wild"; and used as acrobatic practices in operas and ballets. The choreographer himself described them as "fiery circus" artists⁵. For example, there is this illustrative gesture of riding on a horse: the legs spread on both sides and throw up, arms in front as if they held the reins. This gesture is performed in the dance only by men because it is frowned upon for a woman to spread her legs and even more to show them. We still find this representation in the Polovtsian dances of Prince Igor's opera. One of the typical movements of the man's Caucasian dance is the turn on the knees. The towers must be fast and lively. The dancers move from a standing posture to a kneeling posture: knee-high pirouettes, jumps landing on the knees, and so on. Always in a dynamic of combat, which is to track down his opponent without being seen or catch. These moments are often accompanied by shouts to surprise the opponent.

The porosity of stories and boundaries between Caucasian culture and Eastern culture is undeniable for their peoples. For the foreign public, it is difficult to recognize the constituent differences. It is through the dance of women that we are able to grasp variations. With the hegemony of the Russian power, the artists of the region make appear in the dance two national stakes: one translates the character of the people concerned, the other magnifies the nation with the wish to be westernized, even of to rise above the West. This link between a more expressive form and a performance of the nation is particularly interesting for the evolution of representations of the lezginka. Indeed, this dance was first popularized through national companies such as Alanya or the National Ensemble of Georgia, the Chechnya National Ensemble, etc. The expansion of these companies comes from the cultural political issues of the USSR. Indeed, the end of the nineteenth

5 Petipa composed the first scenic Lezginka for the opera *Ludmilla* (1846). Marius Petipa: "Memoirs", Ed Actes Sud, Paris, 1990, p70

century popularized Character dances⁶ as a social and scenic form. This creation is pushed especially by the political tensions and the tensions of wars of the time. It was a propaganda practice and art that today out of the political context has become a separate genre. This practice has allowed the Lezginka to gain notoriety in the region but also in the world by the staging they have put in place. Troops such as the Alanya Dance Ensemble (Ossetia) or the National Ensemble of Georgia, the Chechnya National Ensemble or the Barekamutyun Ensemble of Yerevan (Armenia) present until today a lezginka stylized in their country's colors. Today, this popularity is such in the Caucasus region that each ethnic group claims the origin. A simple research on social networks shows that dance belongs to the culture of different nations: Armenian Lezginka, Chechen Lezginka, Azeri Lezginka, Georgian Lezginka, Russian Lezginka, Dagestan Lezginka, etc.



Poster of the anti-Soviet movement "Peace and Freedom" of 1946: "Caucasian Dance", Stalin as dancer Lezgin. Behind Stalin, the leaders of the French Communist Party: Marcel Cachin, Jacques Duclos, Andre Marty and Maurice Thorez.

Subsequently, in the 1960s, compositions refer more to current daily practices. This allowed the development and emancipation of women's dance. Long dresses get shorter and sometimes leave room for pants and boots. The movements become the same for men and women.

⁶ Character dance is a theatrical art and a type of dance that has several styles. Stylization first includes action, the act of representing, expressing something "limited to essential features", characteristic or conventional, and blurring the too particular details. Then it hears action, expressing something with her personal (style) brand, "her own thinking." Thus, this social and artistic practice can be worked in an ethnological sense (factual reality), in a historical sense (socio-political reconstruction), in a folkloric sense (study of an ethnicity in a given time and space) or even in a much broader sense that of art (actualization of experiences). Sona Pogossian, "Current representations of the Character Dance in France", Master memory, University Paris 8, 2017.

They take place in the dance as warriors. The soft walk becomes dry. Some women also allow themselves to turn on their knees, jump and scream. Yet this image of warrior woman remains very little known outside the Caucasian territory. In the foreign audience, this dance has caused ambivalent reactions: too much aggression, knives flying on stage, a breathtaking technique and an airy elegance. All this has attenuated the original character of the dance in favor of a folkloric, even festive representation of the Caucasian culture on the foreign stage. The performance is frozen on this spectacular technique. In the same way, we can assume that the wars are now over, the lezginka has become more of a symbol of victory, a sign of the magnificence of Caucasian culture. This reflection is supported by the current representations outside the Caucasian territory. In 2006, the Sirarpi dance company, bases in Lyon (France), featured a Caucasian suite with an Armenian dance trio followed by a lezginka solo. This suite was danced by four women. The young lezgin presenting himself to young Armenians is actually a girl disguised as a boy. In the solo of the lezginka, the young woman plays a trick to his girlfriends by disguising himself as a man. It unfolds all the vocabulary of the dance of the man: walking on the tips of feet, turns to knees, jumps, pirouettes, etc. This representation disrupts the usual corporality of man and woman: the viewer realizes see the body of the woman (including the legs) and is surprised at his "wild" performance of this woman who the essence wants (or must be) soft. By this, the traditional image of the woman is totally deconstructed. From an interview with the choreographer, Sirarpik Grigorian, who is of Armenian origin, it seems to us that today the lezginka is above all a historical pride, a sign of bravery and timelessness that has allowed the Caucasus to survive multiple invasions. In this evolution, today, this dance is no longer sublimation of the man's virility and the delicacy of the woman. Nevertheless, she is the living symbol of her story and being.



Lezginka, at the beginning of the XX century
Akhtin, Dagestan region.



Lezginka, Co Sirarpi, Lyon (France)
(c) TCage, 200

In retracing the evolution and transitions of the lezginka, we have highlighted the paradox of a region and its peoples: a Russian orient that does not belong to the Slav culture and does not assimilate to the Arabo-musulman culture or Sino-Asian culture. In these historical sutures, the manifestations of this dance are also a paradox of identity representation. Thus, the lezginka is no longer just a popular art as it was in its early days, nor an art of staging but today it is a societal art: artists are responsible for sustainable development and emic but also etic integration of their culture. In fact, companies such as the National Ballet of Georgia Sukhishvili have recently presented performances on the international scene that break with the traditional image of genres. This variation, known and seen inside the region for more than 50 years, astonishes the foreign public. Recently, one of my acquaintances, a former great dancer and character dancer recognized in France, told me of his positive surprise about Sukhishvili's new program: "girls are rebelling!" A statement that leads us to reposition and question us on the update(s) of dances called "folk", "traditional", etc. From what point this adjustment of behavior is done? One of the hypotheses that could answer this question would be the independence of lezginka as an expressive form of identity outside any form and power of cultural representation. How far can the choreographer-dancer rethink gestural identity (gender) while retaining the "other dimension" (ethnic)?

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December 2017

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- M. Haspelmath: *A grammar of Lezgian*, Walter de Gruyter, 1993.
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- Online website of the dance company Alan <http://alandance.ru/>
- N. Tulikoura, *Le caucase en 30 jours*, Documentaire sur Arte, 2015
<http://www.arte.tv/guide/fr/056783004-A/le-caucase-en-30-jours>
- A series of interviews with Sirarpi dance company (2013-2014) and the company Barekamutyun (2017)