

Transformation of Traditional Dances in its Staging Process With a Specific Example of Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey embodies a rich historical and geographical background, which is parallel to its cultural richness as well. Turkish Folk Dances, being a part of this traditional culture, are one of the tools that represent this richness by evolving and transforming from past to present.

In addition to the survival of folk dances in the territories where they were originally born, these dances also expand beyond this territory due to the changing world at an increasing rate in recent years. This article sheds light on Turkish Folk Dances' evolution and transformation experience, apart from their natural dynamism, during this expansion process.

When doing this, the subject has been evaluated without excluding any of the themes of movement, music, and; costume, which have existed in inseparable integrity until today. While focusing on how Turkish Folk Dances exist on the platforms they are on today, each of the themes mentioned above (dance, music, costume) has been discussed by holding on to the identical approach.

The subject has been evaluated largely based on experiences and observations built up in many years at all levels in this field.

Introduction

Dance is defined as a way of expressing all sorts of human emotions and ideas through music, and the definition of traditional dances is no exception. Furthermore, like all elements of traditional culture, traditional dances are transferred from generation to generation due to their collective

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character, and at the same time they gain an anonymous value by taking on the experiences of generations.

Turkish Folk Dances have a wide range of diversity due to the geography they belong to. When we look from a structural angle at the way these dances are performed by the public, it is possible to see common move structures in some of them, while others do not bear any similarity. However, in practice, what these dances have in common is that they are generally performed in an improvised manner.

When we look back to its roots, dance - being part of all kinds of rituals - is today a tool of expression for people and generally performed on some special occasions such as weddings, farewells organized for joining military service, or circumcision feasts. In this context, when we look at dance along with its components (dance, music, and costume) in the local environments where it is performed today:

- In such natural environments, local musicians move and play in a free manner.
- People can join or leave the dance whenever they wish.
- In weddings for example, dancers may dance on any part of the venue in the way they wish, without worrying about the direction of the dance.
- In addition, with the sensitivity they develop towards the music they hear, people add their own unique attitude and at the same time refer to their memories as they feel while they perform. Therefore, although the general structure of the dance is the same, a very nuanced characteristic structure emerges.
- Generally, there is no obligation for the dancers to start or finish at the same time.
- Naturally, even though the community wears clothes appropriate to its geography and culture, a very colorful structure that varies in clothing details as a result of differences in status, personal tastes and economic situations among people is also exhibited.

On the other hand, this traditional structure undergoes a lot of change when carried to the stage. First of all, what is a stage? The definition of the stage varies depending on the art performed. For example, in cinema sector, it is defined as each part of a movie. In performance arts though, a stage may be described as a place which is supported by technical elements and open to audience's view, where all kinds of artistic activities are physically performed.

In addition to that, when it comes to Folk Dances, a stage is a platform where the dancer expresses and reveals herself/himself abstractly through her/his performance and which “may provide unlimited expressive power depending on choreographer’s arrangement skills” (Nutku, 2013, p.130).

In this context, it has been observed that folk dances have taken place on a wide variety of platforms up to the present.

“Öztürkmen emphasizes that the local dance tradition has gone through three stages over time and turned into a participatory, urban activity. The first stage is that, as a continuation of Community Centers’ experience, the tradition of bringing together different local groups on a national platform once a year is now being undertaken by the private sector. The second stage consists of the dance activities of university students who are not limited to their own local regions but expand their repertoire with dances from other regions. The third stage is the rise of a folk dance market that develops through its own economy.” (Öztürkmen, 2003, p. 148 as cited in Kurt, 2022).

Therefore, Turkish Folk Dances have now begun to take place in a different dimension. At this point, it inevitably became a construct that included different dynamics. When we express it in its most general form being performed on the stage for years, dance has been in existence along with its music and costume. This framework was mostly preserved until the emergence of professional groups, which have increased in number in recent years. However, especially in these new performance platforms, this framework has been overstepped widely, and more personal arrangements have begun to be used. Furthermore, in recent years, different contests and contest criteria have created suitable grounds for such different applications. With the distinction made by ethnochoreologist Andriy Nahachewsky, (1) interventions in traditional forms take place due to the nature of the process of “adapting to the stage” of “participatory dances”, which are learned spontaneously in natural environments by being transferred from generation to generation, as “presentational dance”. (Nahachewsky, 1995, p.4 as cited in Kurt, 2013)

“Traditional move forms may be presented to the audience in a fixed form as a result of a certain preparation and rehearsal process. They may also be performed in an improvised manner with a simple idea or arrangement on a place that may be considered as a stage. Either way, the dance becomes performed for the audience, that is, it is ‘staged.’ The folk dance transferred to the stage is now a part of the ‘show’. At this point, it must be evaluated according to the criteria of ballet, modern dance, contemporary dance, dance

theater, and other stage-dance genres - and, if any, other artistic disciplines with which it comes into contact- that have established certain historical norms. While these dances are adapted to the stage, traditional move forms are being intervened.” (Kurt, 2022).

With this starting point, this article questions the evolutions and transformations each of these three elements has experienced.

1- The transformation of dances regarding moves:

- The nuanced structure of the figures gives way to a standard structure. The dances that all participants perform in their original environments with their own interpretations are tried to be performed on the stage in the same exact way, if possible, to the extent that there is no difference among dancers’ nature of dancing.
- Limiting the diversity of figures within the dance. This is usually done on platforms such as contests for several reasons. Sometimes it may be done in order to conform to a certain time limitation. It may also be done due to the possibility of the dancers not being able to perform difficult parts, so simpler figures of the dance may be preferred. Thus, the goal of presenting a more flawless performance is achieved.
- The beginning and ending of the dance are clear and in conformance with the arrangement. Although there is no rule to start or finish together in the dances performed by local people, dancers start and end on command on the stage.
- Repeating the move a certain number of times. Since there is usually a certain time limitation for the performance, it is determined when the dance will start and end, and accordingly, repetitions are made to conform to the given time. For example, if the duration is five minutes, it is determined from the beginning how many dances will fit into this time or which figures of these dances will be performed and in how many repetitions.
- Performing the dance in different arrangements other than its original form. For example, while halay or horon are generally performed by local people either in a circle or in a straight line, very different separations and alignments are being constructed on the stage. The group may be separated into many sub-groups. These separate sub-groups may dance towards different directions and be placed on the stage in many different forms.

- Allowing both genders to perform dances that are traditionally performed only by men or women.
- Presenting moves symmetrically or asymmetrically. It involves having different sub-groups dance in different directions on the stage at the same time, sometimes in symmetrical and sometimes asymmetrical arrangements.
- Dancing by taking a position relative to the audience. While there is no concern about performing the dance towards the audience in natural environments, it is performed directly towards the audience on stage.
- Adding special facial expressions to moves. For example, all dancers dance with a single facial expression, such as a smiling face.
- Creating a *mise-en-scène* at the beginning, end, or any part of the performance. This may also take place in the natural environments of folk dances. However, what is mentioned here is that it is being done in a place and time against tradition. For example, the groom's shave, which is normally done before the wedding, is placed in the choreography of the dance.
- Amplification and exaggeration of show-oriented moves. Applying larger angles, especially in arm and foot moves, is one of the most common practices recently.
- Simplifying dances to avoid more effort in difficult situations. This may be mostly described as arranging the dances to suit the lowest level in terms of the capacities of the dancers in order to ensure a common minimum level with the available dancer staff.
- In dances with irregular figure structures, adding or removing counts to the move to make it fit to the music. What is meant by irregular figure structures may be explained by describing regular figure structures. At this point, it should first be noted that there is no single answer to this question. Namely, structural pairings such as figures placed on a musical measure, a musical sentence, or on a call and response structure are evaluated as regular figures, while moving and music relationship in situations where this is not the case is considered irregular. For example, while Diyarbakır's *Delile* dance exhibits equality of musical measures and move counts, the *Esmer* dance is just the opposite. In other words, the widely known time of *Esmer* dance's melody is 4/4. Move, on the other hand, is settled over six units of time. So, each move uses 1,5 musical measure. This situation

does not have much importance in natural environments. But being able to create harmony between music and dance that start at the same time on the stage and end at the same time is an expected situation in terms of auditory integrity.

- Presenting traditional dances by blending them with different dance disciplines, especially in professional groups.

“Private professional dance groups such as Fire of Anatolia (Anadolu Ateşi), Ney, and Shaman Dance Theater, which opened to foreign markets in 2000s, were also nourished by the potpourri form of state folk dances and hybrid dance aesthetics and brought continuity to this staging tradition. Traditional Turkish dances have been blended with different dance disciplines of the West, in terms of attitudes, postures and steps, thus modernized traditional dance interpretations have emerged.” (Uzunkaya, 2015, p.110)

“Of course, ‘synthesizing’ different dance types is not the issue of today. These genres have been intertwined for centuries, and the dances have been interpreted in many different ways. There are many different experiments, ranging from character dances in ballets to the eclecticism of ballet solos exhibited in front of halay dance that we watch today in performances of Fire of Anatolia. Interpreting the traditional with a contemporary understanding requires an intense research process. I do not have a single definition of the right way. However, I am sure that as long as different genres can truly ‘nourish’ from each other, intertwine when necessary and preserve their own character, only then ‘good’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘experimental’ interpretations may emerge. Otherwise, it is also very likely to bring traditional and contemporary elements side by side or to leave a sour taste while adding ‘traditional’ flavor to ‘contemporary’.” (Uzunkaya, 2015, p.110, quoted from Kurt)

2- Main topics that draw attention to the change that Turkish folk dance has undergone in terms of music:

- Use of various instruments, different instrument preferences. Using local or folk music instruments as well as Classical Turkish Music instruments or Western instruments.
- Polyphony. In general, the use of multi-instruments may bring along polyphony, especially in larger orchestral arrangements where Western instruments are used. The use of various instruments does not always mean polyphony.

- Changes in beat. This is a situation that is mostly used in contests in order to fit dances to time limitations or is encountered in more show-oriented performances.
- Making optional preferences in musical sentences. Determining musical sentences to be used according to the choreographer's wishes.
- Determining the music to be played from the beginning to the end of the performance and determining the beginning and ending.
- Using different melodies in the same tempo. In fact, this is also the case in the original structure of certain dances. However, what is meant here is that such practices are applied even in dances that are known to be performed with very specific melodies.
- Playing melodies outside the local style. As Altuğ puts it, "It is observed that most of the local features related to the melodies are not taken into consideration when the dance melodies are sung or played during the staging of folk dances." (Altuğ, 1998, p.2).
- Dance music being performed by incompetent musicians. "The melodies of many folk dances are so difficult that they cannot be performed by every instrument player. The fact that non-masters try to play these melodies causes dance music to be heard as distorted and to become widespread in this way." (Altuğ, 1998, p.3)
- Using recorded music instead of live music. This option has been frequently used in recent years. It is regarded as a practice that is both cost-effective and more functional in terms of usage.
- Including various effects on the melody.
- Removing words from verbal dances. Ignoring lyrics, especially in recent years, in more show-oriented performances.
- Removal of shouts made during the dance. Shouts that function to excite people in their natural environment, invite them to dance, or establish order are not included in arrangements where everything is determined beforehand.
- Positioning musicians in a certain place on the stage. Musicians who can move freely in their natural environment often have their position determined in advance on the stage, which is a limited area.
- Making "arrangements in the music outside the original form" to fit the music to the move in irregular figures.

3- Main topics that draw attention to the change that Turkish folk dance has undergone in terms of costumes:

- Preferring a uniform type of clothing, such as using one color, one model and one type of fabric.
- Turning a multi-layered clothing into a single piece of garment. When viewed from the outside, it seems that all the pieces are worn on top of each other. But in fact, one garment is made, and all the other pieces are represented by only as many pieces of fabric as they appear from the outside. This is preferred both to reduce costs and to facilitate quick preparation, especially in contests.
- Producing solutions that will enable clothing pieces to be worn more practically. In clothes representing many regions, especially for multi-piece women's headdresses, all parts of the headdress are pre-fixed and brought into a single piece, making it easier to wear. Another practice is combining pieces such as belts, aprons, and waist ties (kolon) and making them easy to attach to the body instead of wrapping them around the waist, thus allowing them to be worn faster. These practices are solutions produced in recent years because of time limitations of different contest criteria or the requirement to use several types of costumes within a certain period of time.
- The use of other fabrics and materials that provide a visually similar appearance instead of the original fabrics or materials. For example, since the weaving of shal- shepik (şal - şepik) used in the eastern regions has diminished and it is an expensive material, cheaper fabrics that offer the same visuality are used.
- Simplifying the embroidery or preferring machine embroidery instead of handcrafted embroidery. This is one of the ways preferred to reduce costs.
- Uniform applications in adornment and make-up. All dancers' faces have the same make-up.
- Exaggeration of clothing, jewelry, and make-up to create a more flamboyant appearance on stage.
- Choosing fabric and color in clothing according to the light used on stage.
- Representing the region with a costume other than its own clothing culture.

Conclusion:

Some of the main practices mentioned above are the ones that have been encountered in recent years, especially in contests, and some are preferred by professional dance groups. Especially a wide variety of contest criteria is one of the reasons why such practices are applied. This trend, which started on platforms such as contests, where time criteria and competition are important, has accelerated as professional groups increasingly turned to show-oriented performances and tried to produce more contemporary products by making different updates in the performances.

Of course, at this point, perhaps we should not be too surprised by what is going on. When it comes to staging folk dances, it is inevitable that other dynamics will have an impact. The audience factor is the most important factor here. The starting point of all these searches is undoubtedly the desire to create a permanent impact on the audience by providing visual, auditory, and emotional overlap with the audience.

To achieve this, it is as important that the stage equipment supports the performance adequately as it is that the performance is successful. The more accurate and effective the setup on the stage, the greater the overall effect and the more successful and valuable the performance becomes.

Having in mind artistic concerns and the impact of the technical equipment on the performance while trying to stage Turkish Folk Dances necessitate the practices mentioned above.

As a result, it is almost impossible to draw boundaries on the diversity of studies to be carried out in this context. However, relatively speaking, while some of these practices are applied very successfully, some of them, unfortunately, may be far from aesthetic concerns. We can base this on two main reasons. The first is the creativity of the choreographer and her/his experience in the branch of the art that the work she/he creates is related to, and the other is having the budget to realize this entire arrangement.

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