

The “Dance with Daggers” as an Ethno-Marker of Adyghe Culture*

A. N. Sokolova

Adyghe State University,
208, Pervomayskaya ul., Maykop, Republic of Adygea, 385000, Russian Federation

For citation: Sokolova, Alla. “The ‘Dance with Daggers’ as an Ethno-Marker of Adyghe Culture”. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Arts* 11, no. 1 (2021): 39–55. <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu15.2021.103>

This article reviews the history, semantic scope and meaning of the “dance with daggers”, which has survived today as a solo male stage number. The dance is becoming a very important part of academic dance concerts in the North Caucasus, and at the same time dancers with daggers are invited to traditional weddings and corporate parties. Camechas (*квэмэчIас*) are identified as military sports and exercises, while also being a modern dance concert number with the same name. The military sport, circus and dance characteristics of this action are revealed in the article. It is proved that the dance is based on the demonstration of military merits, such as the ability to handle sharp knives freely and easily, to throw them at a target, to overcome any obstacles through high jumps, to keep a visible space in sight, to control the body gracefully and to conquer physical pain. In the history of the development of the dance, a multilayered literary text is formed that has mythological and ethno-informational codes. The meaning of using twelve daggers and a papakha (sheepskin hat), symbolizing intellect/reason and equal to any Caucasian man’s head is revealed. The movements on toes allowing one to “rise”, to be close to the gods and to conform to the contours of the mountain landscape, are comparable to the fine graceful movements of mountain animals using any stone or mound as support. Jumping, whirling, lunging, and manipulating with a large number of daggers are considered as signs that reveal deep ethnic values. The choreographic and musical component of the dance is analyzed as well as tricks that are included in the plot of the dance, allowing the performer to demonstrate traditional hand positions, certain steps, jump height, spin speed. The Western Adyghe have formed a stable musical composition for the “dance with daggers”, which consists of three tunes: “Dzherakai Zafak”, “Kabardinka” and an Ossetian melody arranged by the famous Adyghe accordionist Kim Tletseruk. “Gathering” music also symbolically represents the “dance with daggers” as a product and artistic practice of the entire Caucasus.

Keywords: dance with daggers, dancing tricks, Caucasian dances, solo male dance, *квэмэчIас*.

The scope of research

Circassian solo male dances have never been the subject of a special study, though separate remarks on them are present in Russian-language literature. In the works of M. Beshkok [1], L. Nagaitseva [2], Sh. Shu [3] and others, a solo dance called “*лээнэкIас*” — *tlapechas* is mentioned and described in a very confusing manner. It is presented as a solo dance, but in some cases, girls join. It is also compared or identified with the Kabardian

* This work was supported by the Russian Federal Property Fund, project no. 20-012-00065 “Cultural diffusion of the Circassians of Turkey and Russia: art history and sociocultural analysis”.

“Islamey” and it is juxtaposed with male dances of other peoples of the Caucasus as it uses the “on toes” technique (a special male dancing technique in the Caucasus when a dancer balances on his toes). In the works of Z. Kesheva a solo male dance is also called “lezginka” and it relates to a group of dancing contests [4, p. 14; 5]. The appellative “lezginka” has been transformed from an exonym into a commonly used and generally accepted term that cannot be translated into any other languages and means a solo male Caucasian dance [6]. However, the “lezginka” and the “dance with daggers” are quite different dances, they each require a special study.

As it is impossible to discuss the numerous problems of studying the dance culture of peoples of the Caucasus in one article, the following work focuses only on the history and content of the “dance with daggers” performed on and off the stage in Adygea. Emphasis is placed precisely on the solo “dance with daggers”, and not the massive “fighting”¹ that takes place in professional plot productions. The modern “dance with daggers” in Adygea is performed at almost every concert of the State Dance Ensemble of the Republic of Adygea “Nalmes” and in the concert program of the State Song and Dance Ensemble “Islamey”. Dagger dancers are also invited to perform at weddings, anniversaries and recreational activities for tourists on the Black Sea coast.

The origin of “dance with daggers”

Two sources can be identified for the “dance with daggers” — solo male dances, which could take place without removing the dagger out of its sheath, and special warriors’ exercises that each of the warriors trained for alone or under the supervision of a teacher. It is interesting that travelers and military leaders visiting the Caucasus left us much information about how Adyghe men were dancing in the XVI–XIX centuries. Their descriptions consisted of solo male dances or two men dancing against each other. The authors paid special attention to the “on toes” dancing technique.

One of the first who described Circassian male dance was Nikolaes Witsen (1641–1717). In his book *North and East Tataria or a brief review of several countries and peoples*, first published in Amsterdam in 1692, he wrote:

Circassians have a lot of fun in dancing and they can dance beautifully: in the year one thousand six hundred and ninety-seven (1697), when I was invited to Amsterdam to the table of His Majesty Pyotr Alekseevich, and was awarded a royal honor on the occasion of the great victory won by the troops of his tsar’s majesty over the Turks and Tatars near the mouth of the Don, I saw how two of those people were dancing for about an hour and a half, it is not possible to describe the jumps and their fast body movements; their dance depicted the implementation of the death penalty, the chopping off of the head, arms and legs, which in reality should itself have been disgusting; however, beautiful jumps, arching and a thousand quick movements of the body to the sounds of the instrument made the dance and performance pleasant; sometimes the criminal lay back, on his back and knew how to keep his stomach so flat that his comrade stood on it and performed a somersault several times as if he did not touch him, leaning with one hand he was able to jump over his whole body: the chopping off of his arms and legs was depicted as a dance and the same regarding his beheading with a sword; the dancer, representing the executioner, held a wand in his hand, with which, jumping with rhythm, he depicted everything that had to be done as an executioner [7, p. 553–4].

¹ “Fighting” in the scope of choreographic slang means dancing demonstration of a massive fight with usage of cold weapon.



Fig. 1. "Dances of Circassians". 1818. Based on illustrations of E. M. Korneev in the book "Peoples of Russia". The sheet was published by D. Ferrario in 1818 (Ferrario, Giulio. *Il costume antico e moderno, o, storia <...> di tutti i popoli antichi e moderni <...>* (Firenze: Pen Vincenzo Batelli, 1824), vol. 3). Aquatint. Sheet: 36×26.5. Image: 29×21. Engraver: Biasioli, Angelo (1790–1830) Italy / Milano, Verona. Painter: Palagi, Filippo Pelagio (1775–1860). Italy / Bologna, Turin

It is also possible to find images of a pair of male dances in the drawings of Italian and Russian artists. It is noteworthy that men dance barefoot and without weapons. Performances of dances barefoot are still found among the Circassians of Turkey and Russia as they are often used to mark an important event in the dancer's life or the fulfillment of his dream/desire. For example, a person could make a promise (swear an oath) to his relative or friend, to someone who refrained from marrying for a long time: "If you finally marry, I will dance barefoot at your wedding" (*КIалэм къизищэкIэ ламцIэу сыкъгъэшгощт*). From people who survived the war, it is possible to hear: "I told a neighbor that if I get a letter from my husband at the front, I will dance barefoot" (fig. 1).

Statements have been discovered about Circassian dances among travelers, military figures, spies, merchants, etc. Pavel Petrovich Sviniin (1787–1839) was a writer, artist, traveler, and publisher of the journal *Domestic Notes* and he spoke very passionately about the Circassian dance he had seen, in which the dancer "turned his legs back, jumped on all his toes, and spun" [8].

Lieutenant-General Johann Blaramberg (1800–1878), who served in tsarist Russia, especially noted the jumping in Circassian dances: "...a move consists of small jumps, but it must be said that the position of the legs, almost always turned inwards, makes them very difficult. According to Pallas, one of their dances is very reminiscent of Scottish dance. Two dancers face each other with their arms pressed back and perform jumps and various move-

ments with their legs with amazing dexterity and ease; during this time, the audience beat the rhythm with their palms and hummed as follows: ‘A-ri-ra-ri-ra’” [9, p. 170].

A more detailed description of male dance was presented by the scout and Englishman James Bell (1797–1858), who lived in the Caucasus for three years (1837–1839). While in Dzhubga on May 8, 1837, he and Longworth (a war correspondent for the British newspaper *The Times*) went to a Circassian wedding and witnessed an unusual dance performed, presumably, by a professional *jeguaco* (Circassian “buffoon”). Bell wrote:

The singing, getting louder and louder, more and more violent clapping, combined with shouting and squealing excited the dancer to such an extent that even the most famous European dancer would envy his speed, agility and bizarre twists; many of the figures from his dance were not bad, but the main thing was the jumping, standing on the very tips of his toes, and circling around his own axis with extraordinary speed. At the end of one of these pirouettes, the dancer fell face down on the grass and, making strange sounds resembling ventriloquism, began to moan piteously, as if he had only a short time left to live [10].

Khan-Girey, an expert of Adyghe culture and a bystander at numerous ceremonies and rituals held at the beginning of XIX century beyond the Kuban, also described sole male dances: “Regarding a certain kind different dancing, it lies in the fact that the dancer performing in the middle of the audience is dancing extremely tricky and difficult movements with his feet. He approaches one of the spectators and then touches his clothes with his hand and then that person substitutes him” [11, p. 169].

Russian-speaking researches who saw and described solo Circassian dances usually referred to them as “*lezginkas*” and paid special attention to those dance elements that were absent among their own peoples. For example, lieutenant general of the Russian imperial army Nikolay Fedorovich Dubrovin (1837–1904) was impressed by the movements on toes, legs twirls and deep bows in male Circassian dances: “A dancing person either stood on the toecaps of his slippers, completely twisted his feet out or traced a quick circle arching towards one side and made a gesture with one of his hands as if a rider at full gallop raises something from the ground” [12, p. 116].

The great importance of male dancing on toes can be linked to the imitation of nature and the replication of the movements of mountain goats and roe deer that easily and gracefully traversed along the steep slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. At the same time, folklore evidence connects the dancing on toes with the most ancient rituals dedicated to the God of iron (Tlepsh — in Adyghe mythology, Shishva — in Abkhazian). In the opinion of the Abkhaz scientist K. Adzhindzhal, “The process of ore smelting was a significant event for Abkhazians and Abazins, accompanied by festivities and religious ceremonies <...>. After a successful smelting, dances were performed right there on the hot ground around the ‘furnace’, only on toes so as not to ‘burn your feet’” [3, p. 25].

Consequently, toe dance techniques, various jumps, actively spinning in place in the Adyghe traditional culture were the norm for male solo dances, which was followed by both professional *Dzheguako*-dancers and talented performers from among the common people.

As for the dagger, modern scientific and popular science literature fully reveal its role in Circassian life. It is well known that in the Caucasus “men wore a dagger constantly, starting from adolescence. It was used as a combat and hunting weapon, and as a household item for various household needs — chopping wood, cutting meat, etc. In addition, the dagger was an indispensable accessory for a man of any social stratum who had the

right to carry weapons. The highlander ate, drank, worked, and had fun always with a dagger on his belt and even when going to bed, put it under his headboard” [13]. Bladed weapons for the highlander, and especially the dagger, symbolized and still symbolize manhood. Furthermore, the dagger was not just a weapon, but a source of divine power, like a cross or crescent among believers [13]. It is no accident that the blacksmith Tlepsh in Adyghe mythology is worshiped like a god.

The Highlander was always armed, and in dance he also did not remove his weapons. However, hardly anyone in the dance circle could remove the dagger from its sheath. All weapons exercises were most likely conducted in male unions during military training. From childhood, Circassian boys were taught fencing and chopping first with fake wooden daggers, and then with original weapons. At the same time, any manipulations with weapons, even fake ones, required a precise coordination of movements, flexibility, dexterity, a kind of (non-domestic) mobility that was developed in connection with traditional value orientations. In other words, the professional skills and handling of bladed weapons became partly an art and, to a certain extent, met the conditions of the dance. Moreover, as a rule, such exercises were performed within small groups both with the aim of transferring skills and abilities, as well as from the standpoint of agonistics (competitiveness), which constitutes an essential characteristic of the Circassian mentality [14].

The heroic epic “Nart” contains many confirmations of “artistic rivalry.” In the Adyghe Nartiade there is a plot that speaks about a dance competition between Sausyryko and Shabatnuko. At first, nart Sausyryko danced on a round table — “ane”, to such an extent that not one plate was knocked off. Then nart Shabatnuko put a sword (sashkho) on the ground and danced on his toes on the blade of the weapon, thus becoming the winner of this competition [15, p. 102]. In the Ossetian version of Nartiade, there is a legend about the epic hero Arakhtsau, who danced on the tips of daggers. Before starting the dance, the hero asked that one hundred carts of stones be brought and one hundred daggers be placed into the ground with their tips upwards. When they fulfilled his request, he climbed atop of the stones and, dancing, trampled all one hundred carts of stones into ashes. After that, he climbed onto the daggers and began to dance on them. Under his pressure, the dagger blades bent to the hilt. The hero then moved to a round table, began to dance on it, without disturbing the bread and salt lying there [16, p. 38]. While decoding mythological texts, T. K. Salbiev points to the sacredness of the sacrificial food, which remains untouched on the sacred table during the performance of the dance, and the researcher correlates the stones and daggers pointing upwards with the pattern of pointed islands of the mountains, in the space of which the celebration of the thunderer Wacill takes place.

An expert of Adyghe folklore Sh. Shu, retelling the stories he knew from the Nart epic, wrote: “...at one of the Nart ‘Hase’ — meetings — the first dance was offered to nart Shabatnuko (Badinoko), who jumped on Iane (ane) — a round table with food — and danced along its edge, without upending it or overturning cups on it. Following him, nart Sausoruko (Sosruko) danced, but not along the edge of the table, but along the edge of the bowl that stood on it. In another contest, nart Sausoruko (Sosruko), thrusting his sword with a blade into the ground, danced on its hilt. Then nart Shabatnuko (Badinoko), putting his sword with a hilt into the ground, danced on the edge of the blade” [3, p. 24]. This plot is fixed in a graphic work of the famous Adyghe artist Felix Petuvash as an illustration of the Nart epic.

In the past, evidence began to appear about warriors that could demonstrate a mastery of bladed weapons when receiving guests or at feasts. In the archive newsreel, about the trip of Tsar Nicholas II in the Caucasus, one can see a dancing man jumping over a dagger like a rope. Even though it is difficult to identify the dancing figure and determine whether it is a Circassian or a Cossack, it is clearly visible that the dancer is dressed in Circassian coat and he is distinguished by intense physical preparation. It is possible that in male military communities, the “dance with daggers” existed sporadically as a means to demonstrate particularly outstanding skills of a male warrior in edification of youth and for the amusement of others. However, there is no written evidence that the “dagger dance” existed in the traditional environment as an independent dance genre. The Circassians of Turkey also argue that neither in the past (according to the stories of the elders), nor in the present among the Circassian diaspora such a dance was encountered. Only one testimony was recorded from the repatriate Baturai Shaguch who once saw a man dance around a dagger stuck into the ground. The dagger seemed to indicate a limited space in which the performer moved on his toes.

Competitive games with small daggers and knives have survived in the children’s sub-culture. The essence of the game is that the boys stick a dagger between their spread fingers. The left palm with spread fingers is laid on the ground, the dagger is held in the right hand, and at a fast pace it is thrust between the fingers in a certain order, which changes according to the conditions of the game. The winner is the one who, firstly, does not hurt his hand, and secondly, does not stray from the order of alternating strokes and was able to make these strokes at a fast pace. It is a rather dangerous game, but dexterity, quick reaction, masculinity, endurance, courage, determination are formed and nurtured. The game, known as “in knives,” is still popular with Circassian boys nowadays.

A dagger is not only a weapon, but also a talisman. It is in these two meanings that it is an attribute of all men’s national costumes of peoples in the Caucasus. As an amulet it was used at weddings by Chechens to raise the bride’s veil. Until recently, it was customary for Kabardians to stick daggers along the road along which the bride travelled to be introduced to the groom’s family.

Thus, male dance competitions which have been preserved in Circassian mythology; the story of solitary male dances on toes, described by travelers and the military; Dzheguako entertaining tricks, actively demanded in the traditional Circassian community, the bladed weapon’s culture in children’s games and wedding rituals are significant components from which the stage dance with daggers could be born.

Stage dance with daggers

In the 1930s of the XX century amateur performances picked up momentum in the USSR. Ten-day festivals and Olympics of national arts were held, there was a demand for stage “permitted” dances and songs that demonstrated the “ethnic face” of a multinational country, and a new kind of dance with daggers appeared as one that is transferred to the stage and becomes a performance. It can be assumed that in the first Adyghe Song and Dance Ensemble (1936), the “dance with daggers” was performed by people from the country, talented dancers who managed to observe the dance themselves in their life. But in the second half of the XX century professional choreographers were already engaged in the production of the “dance with daggers”, using their own imagination,

based, perhaps, on genetic memory. In the majority of cases, the first choreographers of national dance groups in the Caucasus were non-Adyghes, masters of their craft, and possessed a strong academic choreographic education. They strove to bring bright concert numbers to the stage. The choreographers skillfully chose the most expressive poses and movements from folk choreography, staged numbers based on traditional values and ideals. Most likely, the “dance with daggers” was simultaneously performed in different ensembles in the Caucasus. When the so-called “national specialists” came to these collectives as leaders and directors, they received the “dance with daggers” in a more or less canonical form.



Fig. 2. Baturay Shaguch. Performance in aul Bolshoy Kichmay, Krasnodar Territory, 2007. Personal archive of Baturay Shaguch

For example, Amerbiy Tsyovitch Kulov, a director of The State Academic Folk Dance Ensemble of Adyge Republic “Nalmes” in the period from 1982 till 1984 and from 1990 till 2002, was working with performers of the “dance with daggers” — Intikham Mamiyok, Asker Guchetle and Ruslan Bzhetshev. According to him, he relied on only two principles — the theatricality of action and following / matching the anatomical capabilities of the artists. There were some performers who were better at jumping, and the performance was filled with them. Other performers were extremely flexible and the choreographer included a trick where they raised a kerchief from the floor, etc.

Gradually, the “dance with daggers” turned into a complex theatrical action in which a man demonstrates military, sports, competitive, circus and dance skills. He walks on his toes, displays various tricks, holds weapon in his mouth and places the dagger on his collar and belt. Daggers are thrown over the performer’s head, from under the knee or elbow, one or several at a time. They juggled, spun and threw the daggers. The dance could end in self-injury: there were cases when a dancer during a performance or in rehearsal could accidentally pierce his leg or palm, injure his mouth, etc. Nevertheless, more and more young men aspired to perform such tricks, allowing them to exhibit their strength, dexterity and skills in martial arts. In the Adyghe language, these exercises are called “*къамэтэчIас*”, which literally means “to stick the nose (tip) of a dagger”. Today, all these tricks have become a decoration of the stage or a mini-performance at weddings, anniversaries and other celebrations (fig. 2).

The genre definition of “dance with daggers”

The “dance with daggers” cannot be definitely called either a dance, or a circus performance, or a sporting event. The genre polymorphism of the “dance with daggers” betrays its most ancient origin, mythological and poetic basis, and indicates a high degree of survivability and adaptability to the most diverse forms of existence. Each genre definition will be analyzed separately.

What military-sport does this dance fall under? It can be associated with several, considering the above plots from the Nart epic. In ancient legends, dancing is equated to



Fig. 3. Baturay Shaguch. Performance in Istanbul, Turkey, 2010. Personal archive of Baturay Shaguch

sports. The dances progress through several stages, each of which becomes more complicated than the previous one. At each stage, the most enduring men remain, while the weaker ones are eliminated. The best dancer receives fame and honor as a reward. As in any sport and in the “dance with daggers,” you need to demonstrate the ultimate capabilities of your body. Not every dancer can perform the tricks and movements that are necessary for the “dance with daggers.” It requires special preparation, many years of training, so that the performer skillfully possesses his body, cleverly holds daggers in his mouth, behind his belt, and in his hands. There is a “military-frightening” characteristic in the “dance with daggers”: the dancer’s spread fingers, battle cries and cries used during the performance of tricks speak to the ancient military origins of the dance, which were then inherited by hunters and Abreks (fig. 3).

In light of the above, why is it still not considered a sporting event? The answer to this consists in the fact that there are, unlike in ballroom dancing with judges, tournaments, and qualifications, no clearly oriented indicators. The dancer’s achievements cannot be clearly assessed. The sport characteristics of the dance coexist with the artistic ones. The aesthetic component of the “dance with daggers” is much higher than that of any purely sports competition.

The second feature of the “dance with daggers” is its theatrical and circus component. Many tricks and actions of a dancer are not designed to achieve a result, as in sports, but rather a theatrical effect or an artistic result. Just as circus artists juggle kettlebells or rings, throw knives at a live target, an artist performing the “dance with daggers” amazes the viewer with unusual actions that are inaccessible to the average person. The handling of daggers invokes fear in the spectator, tension, admiration and surprise. Poorly thrown knives sometimes fly out into the hall and fall in the front rows. There have been times when a knife that was thrown up “landed” right in the center of the table during a cele-



Fig. 4. Baturay Shaguch, 2014. Personal archive of Baturay Shaguch

bration in a restaurant. When the dancer sends a dozen sharp knives to his mouth, the audience freezes. As in the circus, the artist seeks to repeat the trick that he did not succeed the first time. Furthermore, tricks are separated by a “dance pause”. However, the dancer is not on a round stage and, as a rule, he performs only frontally and without any scenery. Recently, dancers with daggers have begun showing their art to the audience (like in the circus) using a special wooden platform that is 200 × 75 cm. It is believed that such a platform was invented by the performer of the “dance with daggers” Asker Guchetle. His know-how consisted of the platform being folded in half and it could be placed, like a suitcase, in the trunk of a passenger car (fig. 4).

The structure of the dance

Structurally, the “dance with daggers” is divided into two main parts. The first consists of tricks with daggers, the second contains dance interludes between tricks. However, the dancers themselves do not agree with this division. According to them, all five minutes of stage time are a dance, inside which certain manipulations with knives are performed. Nevertheless, the division into dance and segments containing tricks is obvious, as it is clear that a proficient knife thrower will never perform a “dagger dance”, and an excellent dancer will be adequately received by the audience, even if he is not very skilled with daggers.

The internal structure of the stunt portion of the dance contains several sections: 1) throwing single knives diagonally across the stage; 2) throwing single knives near the lights; 3) handling knives in the four corners of the stage; 4) the trick “candle”, 5) the trick “fan” 6) throwing knives from the elbow, from under the knee, from the back, etc. The dramaturgy of the stunt part is based on the principle of gradually increasing tension

and the subsequent final gathering of the knives. Two climaxes in the performance can be highlighted. The first is associated with a candlestick trick in which a hat is used. The second climax is a trick with the maximum number of daggers thrown from the mouth. Circassian dancers with daggers themselves take their knives off the stage, unlike, for example, Ossetian dancers, leaving them stuck in the floor. At the end of the performance, the assistant takes the daggers from the scene.

Dance episodes are divided into three parts. The first is the artist's appearance on the stage. The second is dance routines between the demonstration of tricks, and the third is the final dance.

Choreography of "Dance with Daggers"

Despite the components of the number, the "dance with daggers" remains a dance, and not only because the concept of "dance" is stable in this expression. The well-established "dance with daggers" formula is valid for several reasons. Most often, the "dagger dance" is performed in a concert dance program between group and mass dances. In addition, all tricks are performed in dance rhythm using almost the entire set of academic positions of the Adyghe folk dance. Most often, artists perform the fifth position of the hands. The right hand is bent at the elbow and pressed against the shoulder joint, the hand is collected in a fist and lowered down. In dance slang, this movement is called the "gazyr position". The elbow is raised at eye level, the left hand is extended to the side in the third position, the head is turned to the right hand in the direction of movement to the right. The performer's legs move laterally. Often the first position is used: the body is pulled up, the shoulders are pressed down, the chest is brought forward, and the chin is raised. Both hands are lowered down, elbows are freed, hands are gathered in a fist, and brought slightly back from the body. The legs are extended on high demi pointe.

In the "dance with daggers," various jumps, lunges, and spinning are repeatedly used. Often, the artist with daggers does not "enter" the stage, but "flies out" from behind the curtains in a high dramatic jump. At the beginning of the dance, ordinary dagger throwers take to the floor, sometimes complicated by the fact that the dancer throws "untwisted" daggers from the palm of his hand. At the same time, the artist stands on his toes, only periodically dropping to his full foot. The dagger then performs a trick called a candle. All daggers are inserted into the mouth in a certain sequence. At first, two daggers are horizontally laid on top of each other, placed in the mouth and held by the teeth. The next two daggers stand vertically with the handle up, a hat is put on them. The headwear for many dancers is perceived as an object that holds the daggers from falling off. Some artists instead of hats use two vertically standing daggers with fishing line. The most difficult trick is called a "fan". The fan can be small, consisting of six daggers, and a large one, which includes 10–12 daggers.

In the middle of the performance, the artist performs a trick with a small number of daggers, from three to six. He puts them at right angles between the lip and gum and a sharp movement of the head sends the knives in a "circular flight" in front of him. Some daggers-artists practice this trick by throwing knives behind their backs. The movement of daggers to the front is carried out with the help of muscles of the neck, lower jaw and elasticity of the legs. Before the throw, the dancer strains the muscles of the legs as preparing to "lunge" (a lunge is a special male dance technique, in which there is a squat with a

sharp extension of one leg bent at the knee). When the daggers are placed in the mouth, the head is tilted back a bit.

The throwing of knives behind the performer's back involves both back and head muscles. Movements are honed by numerous rehearsals, resulting in massive callouses on the hands and mouth. Knives mounted on the palm and spun with a corkscrew could pierce the palm, but thanks to the callouses this does not happen. In the mouth from numerous repetitions, an outgrowth is formed, which also prevents cuts and infections. However, this significantly affects the teeth. They are destroyed due to contact with metal and the friction.

The culmination of the dance, as a rule, is the performance of a trick with a maximum number of daggers (10–12). First, the dancer collects all the daggers in one hand and puts them in a fan, with the sharp ends pointing down. Then, without any other adaptations, he sends the entire apparatus of daggers to the corner of his mouth, placing it between the lip and gum. After a few seconds and with a sharp movement of his head, he sends the daggers in the form of a metal fan into a somersault. The daggers stick into the floor, forming a kind of semicircle. If one dancer does not successfully stick a point on the floor, the dagger-dancer tries to repeat the trick.

At the conclusion of the dance, the artists again return to throwing single knives, only now they throw them “pretentiously”: “from the elbow”, “from under the foot”, from behind their backs, above their heads, etc. After gathering all the knives from the floor and placing them in the shape of a fan, the dancer leaves the stage (fig. 5).

Music

For most “dagger dances”, theoretically, any quick melody of zygatyats (Circassian folk dance), tlapechas or lezgins can be used. However, practice shows that Adyghe dagger-dances prefer a steady “set” of tunes that are passed on from generation to generation. According to legend, a phonogram of three melodies was created back in the 80s of the XX century, and since then it has been recorded anew by the next generations of musicians using more modern technical equipment that improve the sound quality. The phonogram opens with a drum roll, creating bellicose high spirits. Then the melody “Dzherakay Zafak”, attributed to the legendary Adyghe harmonist Mahomet Khagaudzh (1864–1918) [16, p. 174], is introduced. Following this, one of the famous melodies for Lezginka, called “Kabardinka” (the lezginka is usually danced to this melody) and the Ossetian melody



Fig. 5. Honored Artist of the Kuban Ruslan Siyukhov, photo by Vadim Nechaev, 2014, Krasnodar Territory, Tenginka, recreation center “Eagle Rock”. Feat “fan”

Джеракайский зафак

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Джеракайский зафак". The score is written for piano and consists of six systems of music. Each system includes a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system features a melodic line in the treble clef with a trill-like figure and a bass line with chords marked with a flat sign (Б). The second system continues the melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. The third system shows a more complex melodic line with sixteenth notes and a bass line with a long note. The fourth system features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass line with a long note. The fifth system shows a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass line with a long note. The sixth system concludes with a melodic line and a bass line with chords marked with a flat sign (Б).

Fig. 6. Musical example 1. "Dzherakayskiy zafak". Performed by Rustam Sheudzhen. Music notation by A. N. Sokolova

arranged by Kim Tletseruk completes the phonogram. The whole dance lasts for more than five minutes, with the Lezghinka taking more time (3 minutes), and the initial "Dzherakay Zafak" and the final theme being performed for a minute each. "Dzherakay Zafak" contains a very fast pace with the inclusion of the characteristic "inviting-fanfare" phrase, which marks precisely the "dance with daggers" (fig. 6).

The main tricks during the "dance with daggers" are performed to the melody of the Lezghinka, popularly called "Kabardinka". Like the "Dzherakay Zafak", it consists of two parts which are repeated 9 times (fig. 7).

After the fifth time, there is a long pause (the first stunt climax). After the ninth repetition, there is also a pause, after which the dance number is performed. From here, the music goes to the Ossetian melody, which differs in chord texture and a simple melodic-harmonic formula, in which the once performed motif is then repeated at a

Кабардинка



Fig. 7. Musical example 2. “Kabardinka”. Performed by Rustam Sheudzhen. Music notation by A. N. Sokolova

Осетинская



Fig. 8. Musical example 3. “Osetinskaya”. Performed by Rustam Sheudzhen. Music notation by A. N. Sokolova

different height — a third lower. A major-minor “modulating” construction is created by ear (fig. 8).

Most dagger-dancers like to perform to live music, as musicians clearly follow the performer, their musical accents are consistent with the moments when the knives are stuck in the floor and thrown, as well as dance components. The music is largely subject to the choreography and tricks performed.

Semantic codes in the “dance with daggers”

The use of headwear in the “dance with daggers” is a kind of sacred act with a wide variety of interpretations. According to one of the legendary versions, the word “Circassian” is translated from the Turkic language as a “cutthroat”. Perhaps (such a version exists) the word “Circassian” arose on the basis of the custom to bring the head of a killed warrior to his relatives. This happened if it was not possible to deliver the body of the murdered

person to his homeland. The relatives of the deceased laid his head in his hat, and the hat itself was hung from the saddle.

The hat for the highlander served many functions. To a certain extent, it was a replacement of the head. For an Adyghe, it was perceived not just as an element of their outfit that performed a certain function, but it embodied male dignity. Many researchers point out that men almost never took off their hats, except perhaps just before bedtime. Tradition instructed one to be in a hat indoors, at a celebration and at home during a meal, and when hot and cold.

An attempt to steal one's cap, among the peoples of the Caucasus, could cause a blood feud. If an individual wanted to shame another for being rude, they suggested that the hat be removed [17]. Losing one's hat was equivalent to losing your head. The Adyghes still use the following sayings: *“ПаӀорэ шӀхъварэ тӀури зы”* — “The hat and the head are one and the same”; *“ПаӀор ницахыгъэри, ниӀхъа паукӀыгъэри тӀури зы”* — “To take off his hat — that is to cut off his head.” Sometimes the hat personified the mind of a person or even another person in the type of “alter ego”. For example, the Adyghes know the saying *“УзэупкӀыжъын уимыӀэмэ, уинаӀо еупкӀыжъ”* — “If you have no one to consult with, consult your hat” (information received from N. Emykova).

In the picture entitled “Hedzhret,” which most likely means “abrek,” a man involved in carrying out raids is depicted as a horseman with a bare head. His hand with a dagger, on which a hat was hung, is extended. This may imply a certain degree of intimidation that is directed towards those being pursued: “There are a lot of us — Me and my hat”, but it can also be a certain provocation, a call to overtake another person, to take away the hat, etc. (fig. 9).

In some legends, the highlander's hat symbolizes the sacred chalice, from which men take turns sipping the ritual drink of bakhsuma. The symbolic transformation of the hat into a cup happens today. When in the Adyghes or other mountain villages a lottery is used for important public affairs and the lot is drawn from the cap. A similar incident was recounted by Murdin Teshev from the village of Shkhafit in the Lazarevsky district of the Krasnodar Territory. The men used the elder's hat as a container from which they pulled out paperwork when choosing tasks for performing collective work on gasification of the village: “...the main properties of the head are transferred to the hat, the attribute of which it is, namely, mental activity that provides visionary abilities that reveal omens” [18, p. 37].

T. K. Salbiev points to the symbolism of the hat in regard to marriage. In Ossetia, there was a custom when a hat was thrown at a girl to determine her readiness for marriage. If she stood on her feet, this meant that the matchmakers could be sent to her [18, p. 36]. The Balkars and Karachay had a popular belief that “a man's cap possessed a superpower that could captivate any woman” [19, p. 93].

Thus, the hat in the “dance with daggers” represents the principle of masculinity, pointing to a certain ideal of a man who is smart, coordinated, and calm in the most extreme situations, has an ideal physical form and controls the complex world encrypted by dangerous piercing and sharp objects. When in the first productions of the “dance with daggers” the dancer threw the cap behind the curtains after the candlestick stunt, he received serious reprimands from the elders that such a handling of the cap was unworthy of an Adyghe. Therefore, young dancers after a trick with a hat try not to throw it to the back of the stage, but rather hand it over to an assistant who respectfully carries the attribute backstage.



Fig. 9. "Khedgeret". See: Popko, Ivan. *Black Sea Cossacks in Their Civil and Military Life. Essays on the Edge, Society, Armed Forces and Service. In Seventeen Stories, With an Epilogue, A Map and Four Drawings from the Life* (St. Petersburg: s. n., 1858), 276

The "dance with daggers" has remained in the modern culture of the peoples of the Caucasus as a vestige of ancient military exercises, as a sign of the historical past and as a demonstration of the image of an ideal man, from the point of view of the mountain mentality. The multilayered literary text of the "dance with daggers", the mass of explicit and hidden information codes contained in it, the special skill required for its execution, the aesthetic sculptural beauty of the movements make this dance phenomenal for all peoples of the Caucasus. At the same time, the dance is a product of the Soviet period, in which people managed to encode a significant number of signs and symbols, maintaining a connection with the past that allowed for enhancement of ethnic identification. During the period when new (Soviet) ideals and values were affirmed, everything old (traditional) was declared obsolete, archaic, and worthy of destruction. The Circassians in the "dance

with daggers” were able to preserve such elements of their traditional culture that could not be preserved in any other way. At the same time, they encrypted many values and knowledge that remained theatrically on the surface as an ethnic mask, designed for entertainment and surprise. Internally however, deep ethnic characteristics were preserved: dignity, agonism, valor, respect for traditions, knowledge of their purpose and meanings.

The dance with daggers reveals all three types of dance described by N. V. Osintseva: “a program connected with the mimesis and imitative function of art; a skeletomuscular type focused on the realization of what is provided by the physiology of a human being but not demanded in everyday life; and a transcendent type requiring an altered state of consciousness when the body becomes a kind of a medium and perceives information flowing to it, embodies it in a bodily form” [20, p. 18]. Imitative movements (a dance on toes or pointe), acrobatics and sports performance oriented at military training, and a high emotional power demonstrated in the dance with daggers all appears to be a form of actual communication, an important function of ethnic and macro-ethnic (Caucasian) marking.

Of course, the West-Adyge version of the “dance with daggers” described in the above article will differ from other variants known in the Caucasus (East-Adyge, Abkhazian, Ossetian, Chechen, Dagestan, etc.). These differences are observed at the level of dance plasticity (position of hands, type of steps), the order in which tricks are performed, their types, and, of course, the accompanying music. Nevertheless, the essential characteristics of the “dance with daggers” for the majority of the peoples of the Caucasus remain the same.

References

1. Beshkok, Maskhud. *Adyge Folklore Dance*. Maikop: Adygeiskoe otdelenie Krasnodarskogo knizhnogo izdatel'stva Publ., 1982. (In Russian)
2. Nagaitseva, Liudmila. *Adyge Folk Dances*. Nał'chik: El'brus Publ., 1986. (In Russian)
3. Shu, Shaban. *Folk Dances of Adyghes*. Nał'chik: El'brus Publ., 1992. (In Russian)
4. Kesheva, Zarema. “Dance and Song-Music Culture of the Kabardins in the Second Half of the 20th Century”. Abstract of PhD diss., Institut gumanitarnykh issledovaniı Pravitel'stva KBR i KBNTs RAN Publ., 2004. (In Russian)
5. Kesheva, Zarema, and Natal'ia Varivoda. “Cherkes (Adyge) Dance-Competition: Ethnographic Review”. *Sovremennye problemy nauki i obrazovaniia*, no. 2–2 (2015): 643. (In Russian)
6. Sokolova, Alla. “The Circumpontic Lezginka Dance as a Cultural Phenomenon”. In *Turkic Soundscapes: From Shamanic Voices to Hip-Hop*, eds Razia Sultanova and Megan Rancier, 153–62. London: Routledge, 2018. (SOAS Studies in Music).
7. Vitsen, Nikolai. “North and East Tataria or a Condensed Essay of Several Countries and Peoples”. In *Adygi, balkartsy i karachaevtsy v izvestiıakh evropeiskikh avtorov XIII–XIX vv.*, ed. and comp. by V. Gardanov, 86–98. Nał'chik: El'brus Publ., 1974. Accessed July, 2020. <http://www.vostlit.info/Texts/rus5/Vitsen/otryv3.phtml?id=7072>. (In Russian)
8. Svin'in, Pavel. *Paintings of Russia and the Life of Its Diverse Peoples: From the Travels of P.P. Svinin*. St. Petersburg: tipografiia N. Grecha Publ., 1839, pt. 1. (In Russian)
9. Blaramberg, Iogann. *Historical, Topographical, Statistical, Ethnographic and Military Description of the Caucasus*. Transl., foreword and comment. by I. Nazarova. Nał'chik: El'-Fa Publ., 1999. (In Russian)
10. Bell, Dzheims. *Diary of a Stay in Cherkessia During 1837–1839*. Transl. by K. Mal'bakhov. 2 vols. Nał'chik: El'-Fa Publ., 2007. (In Russian)
11. Khan-Girei, Sultan. *Cherkes Legends: Selected Works*. Nał'chik: El'brus Publ., 1989. (In Russian)
12. Dubrovin, Nikolai. *Cherkesy (Adygea)*. Nał'chik: Kabardino-Balkarskoe otdelenie Vserossiiskogo fonda kul'tury Publ., 1992. (Materialy dlia istorii cherkesskogo naroda, iss. 1). (In Russian)
13. Autlev, Dzhambulat. “The Caucasian Dagger ‘Kama’ is a Legendary Cold Weapon”. *Bivak*. Accessed July 07, 2020. <https://www.bivouac.ru/2015/07/holodnoe-orugie-kavkaza-kingal-kama.html>. (In Russian)

14. Sokolova, Alla. "Adyghe Agonism". *Vestnik Adygeiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya 2: Filologiya i iskusstvovedenie*, iss. 3/63 (2010): 210–6. (In Russian)
15. *Nartha. Adyghe Epic*. Systematization, comp., foreword and comment. by Asker Khèdeg'èlle. 7 vols. Maikop: Adygskii NII Publ., 1970, vol. 3. (*Adyghe Iorylote pamiatnikkher*). (In Russian)
16. Sokolova, Alla. *Adyghe Harmonica in the Context of Ethnic Musical Culture*. Maikop: Kachestvo Publ., 2004. (In Russian)
17. Gatsolaeva, Zareta. "If You are a Man and Wear a Hat...". In *Moda i dizain: istoricheskii opyt — novye tekhnologii. Materialy 8-i mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii, Sankt-Peterburg, 4–7 iuliia 2005 g.*, eds Natal'ia Kalashnikova et al., 229–33. St. Petersburg: SPGUTD Publ., 2005. (In Russian)
18. Salbiev, Tamerlan. *Sacred Marriage. Mythology and Traditional Ossetian Choreography*. 2nd ed. Vladikavkaz: SOIGSI Publ., 2017. (In Russian)
19. Kudaev, Mukhtar. *Ancient Dances of Balkars and Karachayevs*. Nał'chik: El'brus Publ., 1997. (In Russian)
20. Osintseva, Nadezhda. "Dance in the Aspect of Anthropological Ontology". Abstract of PhD diss., Tiumenskii gosudarstvennyi institut iskusstv i kul'tury Publ., 2006. (In Russian)

Received: May 13, 2020
Accepted: November 12, 2020

Author's information:

Alla N. Sokolova — Dr. Habil., Professor; professor_sokolova@mail.ru