

RITUAL DANCES OF EARTH AND RAIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a part of the Albanian ethno-choreographic wealth, the ritual dances of rain and earth. The dances of this nature have created a tradition where it is expressed one of the most important processes of human life, his relationship with earth. The creation of connecting bridges between the concrete life process and dance reveals the ability the latter has as a human activity. The paper also analyses the structural construction of the ritual dances, where their artistic result is the intersection of the poetic text, the musical accompaniment and the dancing elements. Moreover, the dramaturgical line of the ritual action in this kind of dance is also discussed since it creates a motor morphology that clearly expresses its content. The samples are extracted from different regions of the country, from north to south. In the representative samples that this paper refers to, it is searched and confirmed the role, the place and the importance that their presence has on the Albanian ethno-choreography. At the same time samples considering these shows the values of an early tradition in the Albanian dance characterised by a diverse, emotional content.

Keywords: ritual, ritual dance, the planting ritual, the rain ritual, dance, choreographic structure, plastic imitation.

Introduction

The title of this paper has a catalogue of great interest in the archive of Albanian ethno-choreography and it is connected to the dances that address the topic of planting. The relationship that humankind has created with earth since antiquity has been very direct and concrete. Humankind realized the great value that earth had for its livelihood through the planting process. This daily human activity became an event where people got to know the planting cultures and created an awareness of the benefits they bring to their lives. The planting culture was a very important source for the economy of the South Illyria in the second half of the last millennium B.C¹. This fact increased the interest to commit to the relationship with the land and to create its cult. The ritual dance of planting itself is an artistic expression of the appreciation

¹Shkurti, Spiro, *The traditional agriculture and the grain planting in Upper Shpat*, Tirana, 1981, page 93

that humankind addressed to the earth for every material good gained from it. The rain ritual, likewise, expresses the importance that it had in increasing the fertility of the land.

The planting ritual

The planting process was connected to different natural phenomena such as hail, floods, drought various plant diseases that were at the time unexplainable by humankind. These situations inflicted fear to humans, and as every other moment of weakness, the dedication and prayers to the cults and gods to bring prosperity and lightness were necessary. The act of praying and dedication to the god was for humans a mentality that accompanied all their activities, hence it also appeared in the planting process. Humankind started to practice the obligations towards god even in plastic, imitating actions of the planting process. Such moves acquired slowly the features of a dancing nature and these creations started to be danced just before the planting. In this way, connecting bridges between the concrete, human action and dance were built, which at the time was an activity used to motivate humans to become more brave. This also explains the reason why the society used to believe in the ability of dance to inspire and influence towards the realization of a goal.

“Regarding agriculture, our people have created a sample dance that generalizes with the form and idea of how the semination works”².

The presence of dances for the land, expressed in the topic of plantation and its different variations in all our ethno-choreographic territory, shows firstly an ideo-aesthetic unity of the Albanian dance. Secondly, regardless of the common topic reference and of the compositional elements of the same poetic text, music and dance, they show an attempt for diversity and enrichment of the dance expressive means, especially with the different variants in the interpretative formation. Thirdly, in terms of choreographic structure, they represent an evolution with their beginnings, which shows a process of the cultural awareness within the Albanian folkloric dance and at the same time, they show a “real aesthetic transformation, taking crystalised choreographic forms and shapes”³.

The cases or examples that are going to be analysed to discuss this topic are the following:

“Qysh millet far e grunit-o”, “How to plant grain seed” of the Selcë of Shpati village in Elbasanit.

“Kesh ta dijkëbëhetgruni”, “I want to know where grain is made”, from the Region of Zadrime.

²Selimi, Skënder, *The Albanian Choreographic Folklore*, SH.B.L.U Tirana 2003, page 67.

³Bogdani, Ramazan, Article “*The planting dance*”, *Folkloric Culture*, Nr.2, 1982, page 153.

“Qysh millet fara e piperitdhe e orizit”, “How to plant the seed of pepper and rice” from the region of Dishnica in Përmet.

“Vallja e mbledhjes se grunitdheelbit”, “Sowing wheat and barley dance”, The Kurbini Group (Laç).

“A e din tisi millet fara”, “Do you know how to plant a seed” from the Puka region.

“Kyorizinësi”, “This rice in sini” of Gostimë village of Elbasan district.

“Qysh millet far e grunit-o”, “How to plant grain seed”, of the Selcë of Shpati village in Elbasan⁴.

From the starting of the dance, the verses correspond with the elements of the dance: “Hidhashtu, o mojhidhkështu/Hidhekëllqenpërmbigju”. The dancing morphology consists of a motif with horizontal extension and a tendency to be as close to the ground as possible. It is treated by small steps and minimal displacement. The steps have a simple character, but contain jumps, with a predisposition to raise the knee to a slightly higher level. The expressive elements of the motif such as the body nuances with left and right turns or the hands that get up and down following the impulse of the foot throw, enrich the range of the plastic-dancing action. Subsequently, through the acceleration of the rhythm, the jumps and rises of the leg become more evident. The structure of the motif and the way the steps or leg movements make possible the contact with the ground, show the reference to the character belonging of the ritual dances, which is the motif of the collision or compression of the foot on the ground. While the elegance and delicacy of the female interpretation refers to the caress, where the love for the earth and its direct connection with humans is expressed. This dance is accompanied by a polyphonic song that is characterised by an interpretation and combination of voices. The dance does not have a musical accompaniment, but uses as a rhythmic tool the “chest money” of coins as an ornamental part of the folk costume.

“Kesh ta dijkebëhetgruni”, “I want to know where grain is made”, from the Region of Zadrime⁵.

This artistic creation has been considered as the most typical variation that addresses the process of planting and the dances of earth in the folk dance repertoire. Its choreographic structure consists of three moments, where the movement is fused with the imitative actions. The movements are contained, small and with light jumps, adjacent to the ground.

⁴Bogdani, Ramazan, Archive of the Institute of Folkloric Culture, (A.I.K.P.), *How to plant grain seed*, Dance from the Shpat region, Elbasan, 1981, Kino Film (k.f.) nr. 106/5.

⁵ A.I.K.P. *I want to know where grain is made*, Dance from the Zadrime region, Kino Film Nr. 12/2 5 (Gathered by Bogdani, Ramazan).

The first moment has to do with a movement of the right hand that goes from left to the right at the level of the chest and resembles the action of dispersing or throwing a seed. This action has a dynamic character, that is followed by the movement of the head from left to right, while the body has a minimal fracture, firstly on the left and then on the right. The feet also make a shifting step to the right with the right foot, followed by a joining step of the left foot to the right one. This plastic action is accompanied by the verse: *kesht ta dikebahetgruni, hej*.

The second moment involves raising the right hand, then bending the body forward and placing the index finger of the right hand on the ground surface. This plastic action is followed by the accompanied: *sillegishtin, lshoupërdhe*.

The third moment is represented by light jumps on the ground on the left foot, the left hand is placed on the waist and the right one is raised upwards accompanying the hitting action on the ground. This plastic action is followed with the verse: *A bu-bukcimt' mirpom'ke*.

“Qysh millet fara e piperitdhe e orizit”, “*How to plant the seed of pepper and rice*”, from the region of Dishnica⁶.

It is a dance that reveals its belonging as a ritual dance only in its last moment, when the performers are back to their starting position and have finished the poetic text, stand still and bend forwards three times, following this action with the recitative: “*FalemZot, falemZot, falemZot*”.

From the structural point of view this dance has these characteristics: 1) morphologically the motif is a simple 2-step: a. the feet do a right-shift step with the right foot and a joining step with the left foot. The step tends to rise slightly from the ground without gaining the jumping ability, b. the hands are joined, c. the hands are together and the distance is very small, almost adjacent to each other's shoulders, d. the body is directed towards the center of the circle, e. the head is directed to the first dancer; 2) the formation, a narrow circle but not closed, that shifts to the right. 3) The kind of dance, a group dance but with a solo character for the first dancer, who creates other figures by turning face to face with other dancers and with the back towards the circle. 4) The shape, one part.

“Vallja e mbjelljessëgrunitdheelbit”, “*Sowing wheat and barley dance*”, The Kurbini Group (Laç)⁷

⁶ A.I.K.P. *How to plant the seed of pepper and rice*, Dance from the region of Rreze and Dishnica, Permet district, Kino film 4/1 (Gathered by Bogdani, Ramazan).

⁷ Kurbini Group (Lac), *Ritual dance* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jFPijw_IPc

This is a variation of the ritual dances of the earth that is more evolved than the other examples for some reasons related to its artistic organisation. These elements are visible firstly in the musical accompaniment, since it is accompanied by a group of çifteli and vocals, secondly in the use of two forms of the earth ritual, that of the finger planting and that of throwing, and thirdly, in the dynamism of the scenic action, which is associated with a fluid and impulsive displacement of the plastic actions of the performers.

The compositional structure has several moments: 1) The foot planting motif that has a simple three-step structure, with a morphology where the first step is sideways, the second is crossed forwards and the third is in place, which is elaborated in a formation of two parallel lines facing each other; 2) The relocation through free steps in the formation of a straight back line (these steps imply the form of planting with minimal jumps); 3) The action that imitates throwing the grain seed on the ground, where the left hand is raised on the waist level. It is rounded forwards and horizontally, near to the body, as having a round container, meaning that the container holds the seeds for the planting. The right hand performs the front-side action as if throwing the seeds through the fields. Together with the hand, the body turns for inertia, creating the image of a dynamic movement; 4) The moment of finger planting, the feet stand motionless straight, next to each other. The left hand goes back on the bended waist, while the right hand comes forward, lying forward-down in the direction perpendicular to the ground. The body bends deeply forwards. This action is accompanied with the verse: "*O ulegishtin o lalpërdhe*", that is repeated twice, where after the first time the body is raised, imitating the action of wiping sweat from the forehead; 5) The moment of the successive steps, crossing the left foot once forward and once backward to the right that shifts only to the right, this action implies the planting with minimal jumps. The formation is a half circle with hands chained upwards and at the end, after finishing the circle, the performers are placed in a straight line in front of the spectators; 6) The action that mimics throwing the barley seed into the ground, which this time is elaborated by moving forwards in the formation of a straight horizontal line; 7) The moment of finger planting, the feet stand motionless straight, next to each other. The left hand goes back on the bended waist, while the right hand comes forward, lying forward-down in the direction perpendicular to the ground. The body bends deeply forwards. This action is accompanied with the verse: "*O ulegishtin o lalpërdhe*", that is repeated twice, where after the first time the body is raised, imitating the action of wiping sweat from the forehead.

All the poetic text in this variant is sung by all the six girls who dance, while from the musical point of view, the accompaniment of this dance is in the form of introduction and sung verse.

The musical value is 4/4. The text of the accompanying song deals with the different agricultural crops, such as wheat and barley that are considered to be important objects for the Albanian ethnography, mainly for the early periods when they were cultivated. "The customs and pagan

ceremonies are more connected to the antic ones (wheat, barley, rye) than to the late ones. And this is quite natural, because the ancient ones are the early cereals"⁸.

"A e din tisi millet fara", "*Do you know how to plant a seed*", from the Puke region⁹.

This folkloric creation has a choreographic conception that defines a structure of four dancing moments (motifs), that together represent a choreographic phrase that is repeated four times with the same sung verses, but changing the naming of the agriculture crops, namely corn, wheat, barley and white bean. The dancing morphology relies on the substantive decipherment of each verse of the poetic text by the plastic action. The moments are: 1) The forward walking, that has a preparatory character where the dancers use also the handkerchief, becomes a big forward step with the left from the right of the circle, the right foot approaches the left one slightly diagonal, in this position the knees are bended, followed by a twist of the body, moving the handkerchief. This motif is followed by the verse: "*A din tisi millet misrloe*"; 2) The imitation of throwing the seed (where the plastic movement is the same as the third action in the Group of Kurbini); 3) The third moment is the indicative gesture of the ground with the finger (the body bends deeply forwards and the right hand touches the ground with the tips of the fingers and then, by sitting the body up, the left hand performs a bow to the left passing from the back to the front of the forehead); 4) This moment consists of an in-place jumo, through beating the ground with the sole of the right foot, while the left one holds the body weight.

"Kyorizinësin", "*This rice in sini*", of Gostimë village of Elbasan district

This case has been considered to bring some additional elements that appear in the ritual dance for the earth with the planting topic. These elements enrich the concept and structure but mostly the expressive tools of the ritual dance, helping to understand the process of aesthetic evolution of the Albanian choreographic folklore that inherits the elements of early tradition but also enriches it with new expressive tools from a kinetic point of view. These structural elements regard the formation (in terms of performers, where it is shown the common presences of women and men in the choreographic action) and the plastic tools or dancing morphology, where the plastic action of the imitation of the sickle harvest is added. The dancing concept is based on three choreographic phrases: 1) the imitation of throwing the seed that corresponds to the verses: "*Si e mbjellimmoj ne orizin/ Jakështu o mojjakështu*"; 2) the light hit to the ground with the left foot that corresponds to the verse: "*Hidhekëmbën o përmbigju-a*"; 3) The plastic imitation of the sickle harvest process, that corresponds to the verses: "*Si e korrimmoj ne orizin/ Jakështu o mojjakështu*".

⁸Shkurti, Spiro, *Traditional agriculture and the cereal planting in the Upper Shpat*, Tirana 1981, page 94

⁹A.I.K.P., *Do you know how to plant a seed*, Dance from F.F Puka district, Kf.nr.183/2 (Gathered by Bogdani, Ramazan).

The song is followed by the men, who sing accompanied by the rhythm of *dybek*, while the women dance. They move in simple, uninterrupted steps in a circle from the right and then in a straight line in the front. All the examples mentioned above show that in the ritual plant-themed earth dances, the choreographic morphology consists in hands gestures, foot movement and body plastics. All are harmonized in such a form that creates an "artistic ensemble"¹⁰. This conclusion testifies the values of an early tradition of Albanian dance that is characterized by a diverse, emotional content.

The rain ritual

Rituals dedicated to rain that man has created as a way to express the importance of this natural phenomenon for agriculture and the prosperity of its products, are also part of the ritual dances of land and agriculture. In times of great droughtness, when crops were in danger by the lack of rain, people created the ritual of rain through the figure of "*Dordolec*" and where "its magical rituals are generally imitative: they imitate the rainfall"¹¹. People fully believed in the functionality of this ritual and they applied it in the periods when the necessity of rain was vital. Thus, they accepted the rain ritual as part of the customary and traditional beliefs and thus explains its presence in many people in the world. "This custom is known throughout the Balkans, among Bulgarians, Romanians, Vlachs, Greeksextending also to Moldavia, Germany and even England"¹².

From the point of view of choreographic plasticity, the dances of this ritual are very simple, relying on a few small jumps. It is more about the imitation of the figure of *Dordolec* (*scarecrow*), especially in terms of the elements of his clothing with leaves or moist grass all over his body. Another detail is throwing water on the scarecrow, who then jumps or dances with the intention of sprinkling all the space around him with water. The organisation of this ritual seemed to calm the conscience of the people, letting them hope that soon it would rain.

"These creations have only an agricultural character and are connected directly to the production of wheat and corn, i.e. bread crops and not livestock...The scarecrow himself appears to us in the origin of a deity that had to do with the waters but who had the power to bring rainfall"¹³.

In our country this ritual has an extension in different regions and is a combination of the aforementioned elements. Despite the limitations in the means of expression, these rituals are intended to impose a belief and to provoke a desire to be fulfilled. Examples of this ritual are present in Berat, Shkodër, Tiranë, Elbasan (Labinot), in the South of Albania. One of the

¹⁰Selimi,Skënder, *Albanian Choreographic Folklore*, SH.B.L.U, Tirana 2003, page 64.

¹¹Tirta, Mark, *The cults of agriculture and livestock in our people*, Ethnography IX, 1980, page 199.

¹² Sachs, Curt, *World History of the Dance*, 1963, page 115.

¹³Tirta,Mark, *The agriculture and livestock cults in our people*. Etnografia IX, 1980, faqe 199.

elements of the ritual action is the poetic text, which in different territories and regions, varies in local dialects, but its content is a prayer and desire for prosperity. This fact is confirmed in the verses: Scarecrow, bring us rain/to do our new corn (South Albania)¹⁴, fall rain fall/to do our new corn (Labinot - Elbasan)¹⁵, god bring us rain/blessings for many years (Shkodër)¹⁶.

The dramatic line of the ritual action is made possible by the combination of the actions of a boy covered with leaves all over his body, in the role of a scarecrow and of a group of males.

They are all placed in a row and from time to time they tease the scarecrow by singing a song about him. The morphology of their plastic action consists of the position of the hands holding in front of them with palms facing the sky, perhaps creating the idea of a praying position of the Muslim believers and of a slow walk that accelerates by the intensity provoked by the lyrics and music. In this moment, the scarecrow starts moving with simple steps, with some jumps as a slow run left to right in the shape of a circle.

This action is repeated twice and on the third repetition, one of the two girls standing in front of the men throws a bucket of water. After this situation, the scarecrow jumps all over the space, aiming to sprinkle the soil with the water left in the leaves he is covered with. Following his action, the scarecrow comes back, approaches the woman with the bread who extends the whole pan in front of him and the scarecrow takes as much bread as he likes.

"Dordolec or dordozi" The Folkloric Festival of Gjirokastra, The district of Tirana 1988¹⁷

A more moderate variant brought in the form of a game with very enthusiastic notes of ritual rain dances is also the "*Dordolec or dordozi*". The participants are a group of 12 girls and a man, in the role of the scarecrow. The dance has a structure of two motifs that develop in a closed circular formation with hands clasped at shoulder height, where the choreographic action is addressed to the center of the circle, in which the scarecrow stands. Morphologically the first motif consists of continuous steps with displacement to the right of the circle. There are in total 16 consecutive steps and the last one is a closing step, where both feet are close to each other, here ends the first choreographic sentence. All this development of the first motif is accompanied by the first verses of the poetic text:

*dordolec or dordozi,
how could we ever pray to you,*

¹⁴Scarecrow bring us rain, Folkloric Lyrics, 1, page 271

¹⁵Rain-rain, bring us rain, Folkloric Lyrics, 1, page 279

¹⁶God give us rain, Folkloric Lyrics, 1, page 280

¹⁷*Dordolec or dordozi*, The Folkloric Festival of Gjirokastra the group of the region Tirana, 1988, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRsds3mvg74>

*to rain again,
to have better wheat*

The second choreographic sentence has the structure of the triad, which is interpreted at an accelerated pace repeating 16 times, with a particular plastic character and energy. In the last time of the second motif, the group of girls close the circle towards the center where there is the character that symbolizes the scarecrow. All this development of the second motif is accompanied from the second and third verse of the poetic text:

*scarecrow or scarecrow
how do you celebrate new year's eve
wearing a hoody and a cob
one by one and two by two
scarecrow or scarecrow
you don't need you anymore
until cobs are grown
and we water you
dordolec or dordozi,
sifestonviti e ri,
mekapuc e me kalli,
njënganjë e dynga dy.
Dordolec or dordozi,
skemi ma nevojë për ty,
sat'narritkallinin,
sat'lagimnevety.*

During the development of the two choreographic sentences the action of the scarecrow has an accompanying character, pantomime and without any plastic and emotional load. Concluding, it can be said that the ritual dances of earth and rain in the Albanian ethno-choreography confirm once again the earliness of our dance, but also the function that they play today as artistic creations of the identity of our spiritual culture.

Conclusions

All the examples treated previously show that in the earth ritual dances with the topic of planting, the choreographic morphology contains hands gestures, foot movements and body plastics. All these harmonize in such a form that creates an aesthetic expression of the spiritual wealth of our people. The presence of dances for earth expressed in the topic of planting and rituals dedicated to *rain*, with their different variations in all our ethno-choreographic territory,

show *firstly* an ideo-aesthetic unity of the Albanian dance. *Secondly*, despite the common thematic reference and the compositional elements of the same poetic text, music and dance, they show an effort to diversify and enrich the expressive means of dance, especially with the different variations in the interpretative formation. Thirdly, in terms of choreographic structure, they represent a revolution with their beginnings that shows a process of cultural awareness within the Albanian dance. The handling of these examples testifies the values of an early tradition of the Albanina dance that is characterized by a diverse emotional content.

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Kurbini Group (Laçi) *Ritual dances*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jFPijw_IPc.

Dordolec or dordozi, Gjirokastra Folkloric Festival, Tirana District group 1988
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRsds3mvg74>

Dordolecbjernashi, Folkloric lyrics,1