

Dance in ukrainian culture essay



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Proud and warlike – is the essence of Ukrainian dance, a product of a country with an ever changing political environment. Dance is a visual history that reflects the political environment, and the country as a whole. “ Man, through dance, communicates to the onlooker his national character, lifestyle, religious beliefs, and the effect that historical events have had in forming his nationality. The geographical aspects of climate and topography, while influencing the type of clothing and footwear to be worn, in turn influence the quality of movement to be performed in the dance (Zerebecky 5).

” So, in order to understand the dance, it is necessary to place dance in the context from which it sprang. This paper explores Ukrainian dance tradition through the lenses of its history and indigenous cultural heritage. Historical Background Archeological evidence, consisting of excavations of early human dwellings, burial sites, bone fragments, rudimentary tools, weapons, and cave paintings, shows that humans inhabited Ukraine during the Paleolithic Age, which is 100, 000 years ago.

Although a majority of the inhabitants were considered to be a nomadic people of hunters and gatherers, dwelling places of humans were discovered by archaeologists in the vicinity of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. This discovery is one of the oldest human settlements. Various implements used by primitive man were found, among them flint scrapers for preparing animal skins, bones of owls, as well as small drilled shells, and bone ornaments. There was also a sculpture of the head of an animal in solid shalk (Hrushevsky 8).

Early human beings probably recreated in their dance the important aspects of their existence, and religion probably centered on an animistic belief in the powers of nature and animals. Early humans reenacted in dance form the hunt, fertility, the movement of animals and birds, and the effects of nature. One of the most ancient remnants of ritual dances was found in the stone idol, Svitovyt, estimated to be from the tenth century B. C. The carved sandstone idol itself stands about seven feet tall, has four sides, and is divided into three parts.

Four faces and bodies, dressed in the garb typical of the Kyivan Rus Kniaz (princes), are carved on the very top layer (Subtelny 6-7). The top layer, scholars propose, is representative of "heaven", with its various gods (Zerebecky 7). The middle section of the idol illustrates four small human figures, with large heads and short legs, all holding hands. This layer depicts the earth and its people in ritual dance around an idol. Four faces with evil expressions, which could be related to the demonological figures of the realm of the Chornoboh from ancient Slavic mythology, are portrayed on the bottom layer.

Archeologist, M. Miller, believes that this idol once represented the whole cosmos of the ancient Ukrainians. In regard to the origins of Ukrainian dance, it provides us with a factual link to the history of the ancient ritual dances (Zerebecky 7). During the Neolithic Age, which is approximately 10,000 to 7,000 years ago or 8,000 to 2,000 B. C. , it is agreed that evidence shows the nomadic tribes did settle in permanent encampments in a herding agricultural civilization (Subtelny 7). Trypillian Culture in Ukraine dated to 6,

000 to 4, 000 years ago and bears the name of the small town of Tripillya of the Kyiv district.

It was during this time that the bow and sickle came into use, as well as evidence of a matriarchal society (Hrushevsky 9). Archaeological excavations have yielded clay vessels depicting female figures amidst the characteristic Trypillian spiral-meander design and stylized sheaves of grain. Archeologists believe that the female figures are posed in a ritual dance calling for good harvest. Further evidence of dance among the early Ukrainians can be found in Crimea, where ancient funeral dances are depicted on the headstones of prehistoric graves (Zerebecky 5).

The religious practices of the Trypillian Period centered on the worship of the powers of nature and of the ancestors. Dance reflected these religious beliefs. As the social order was a matriarchal one, the woman played a central role in the ritual ceremonies, of which movement was as integral part (Zerebecky 6). For the next 3000 years Ukraine was settled by different groups of people, the most important of which was the Scythians. A nomadic, warring, barbaric people, they made their first appearance on the Ukrainian steppe in the eighth century B. C. Reportedly arriving from central Asia, the Scythians entered the steppe region intent on displacing the Cimmerians.

The Scythians were successful, and maintained a position of power that lasted one thousand years. (Subtelny 13-15). There is also the existence of dance in Scythian culture. Several plaques, as well as clay figures, have been discovered in the burial mounds depicting dance. The figures appear dressed

in Greek attire, or completely absent of clothes in the case of the boys.

Several figures depict a girl carrying a thyrsus or staff.

Her head is looking up, the back or front of the torso faces the viewer while the legs face sideways. All figures are on their toes with slightly flexed knees. One figure illustrates a girl dancing with a knife in one hand and a lamb in the next. In another, a young boy carries a tambourine. Two more figures of women depict a more side angle to view the body with arms carried overhead or in a more downward position. Once again, the figures are dancing on their toes with knees slightly flexed. Based on this evidence, it would seem that dance was an important part of the Scythian culture (Subtelny 16-22).

The Sarmatians moved westward at the end of the fifth and beginning of the fourth centuries B. C. , and this movement occurred on an extensive scale in the third and second centuries occupying a good part of Ukraine. At this time ten major tribes were documented (Hrushevsky 17). Dance continued to be important. Four metal figurines were discovered at an excavation site in the Kyiv region dating to the sixth century B. C. The legs of the men are in an open turned out position bent at the knees, with the arms placed in fists on either side of the body.

A possible conjecture is that they are in the process of squatting in the Ukrainian dance movement, the Prysiadka. Their facial expressions are quite serious, suggesting that the dance movement was more likely the concentrated performance of a ritual, rather than an amusing recreation... It is also worthwhile to note that, the placing of the arms, feet, torso and head

of the figurines is representative of typical dance movements of a later era, that of the Skomorokhy of Kyivan Rus (Zerebecky 9).

From the first to the seventh century A. D., the Antae, considered to be the direct ancestors of the people who formed the Kyivan Rus' state, occupied Ukraine. They were supposed to have migrated into Ukraine from the Danube and spread as far East as the Dnieper and the Azov Sea. The Antae were the same race which later became known as "Slavs." (Hrushevsky 17) The term "Slav" was actually a misunderstanding of a very cordial introduction. "Slav", which means man, and "Slava", which means woman, was translated to mean tribe by the Romans. The Antae were severely compromised with their struggles against the tribe Avar (Hrushevsky 18).

Dance Within Religious Beliefs and Rituals A dualism of religious belief was present among the ancient Ukrainians. All the major seasonal celebrations were permeated with this dualism, which centered on an animistic world outlook, the cult of nature and clan and ancestor worship, the cult of the dead. Of the two, ancestor worship is considered to be the oldest form of religious expression (Zerebecky 7). These religious practices were largely centered on sun-worship and on specific events that occurred in daily life, such as birth, death, ancestors, marriage and harvest time.

The pantheon of gods were: The sun god, Dazhboh, the sky god, Svaroh, the god of thunder and lightning, Perun, and the god of the livestock, Veles-Volos. Dazhboh was the most important. He was the giver of light, warmth, and life (Zerebecky 7). However, all three were considered instrumental to a bountiful harvest. To appease the gods and the powers of nature, which in

turn affected daily life, various rituals and ceremonies were performed to gain favor. This included specific movements, which were performed in a circle, around either a stone or wooden idol representing the god (Zerebecky 7).

These movements were accompanied by songs and chants. Because women held a central and significant place in this early society, it was up to the women to appeal for the fertility of humans, animals, and the land. This was done through simple gesture to imitate rainfall, wind, thunder, and the growth of crops. This early ceremonial or ritual dance form is called, Obriadovij Tanky, and is collectively called, Khorovody (Shatulsky 13-15). Graveyards were an important site for these ritual ceremonies, which directly relates to ancestor worship.

It was believed that when a person died on earth, the spirit would live in the other world. These ancestor spirits never left their family or clan, but remained in the form of Didy or Lady, the spirit guardians of the household, clan, and family. These spirits inhabited the fields and grain, protecting the growing crop from evil spirits, and in turn guaranteed a good harvest. These spirits were embodied in the Snip-Rai, the ceremonial sheaf of grain collected at the end of harvest (Zerebecky 9-10). The most numerous Khorovody are those relating to the spring cycle of celebrations, the Vesnianky-Hakilky.

Girls gathered in groups, and went into the village or the surrounding community. These dances were performed at road intersections, in pastures, orchards, forests, or near water (Shatulsky 17). The different locations paid

respect to the various gods, Dazhboh, Svaroh, Perun. They represented the battle between summer and winter, and were performed for the sole purpose of summoning spring. The theme of these dances not only centered on the battle between summer and winter and the return of spring, but also on awakening nature, to ensure a bountiful harvest, love, and marriage (Zerebecky 10-11).

Choreographically, the closed circle formation was used, called Vinok, which was subdivided into two or more concentric circles, or chain and line formations. The Vinok represented a paying of respect to the sun. If the circle moved east to west, it pleaded for a hasty arrival of spring, fruitful harvest, or happy marriage. If the circle move from west to east, it meant an unhappy marriage or mourning (Shatulsky 19). Other patterns developed in the Vesnianky, such as the gates or Vorota. Couples, facing each other, joined hands and raised them for others to pass under.

This gesture symbolized the gates through which new spirits, happiness, spring, the sun, luck, health, and a good harvest would pass. The bridge or Most was formed by girls crossing their arms and joining hands. A male baby would then be passed from one to the other, which represented the rebirth of nature and the approaching spring (Zerebecky 11). The summer festival of Ivana Kupalo took place on the eve of June 24th. The Kupalo festival is a pagan holiday on the summer solstice commemorating the mythological story of a goddess Marena stealing a young man, Ivan, from his human love.

The Kupalo centered around the belief that at the height of nature's splendor, the forest nymphs or Mavky, as well as vampires, witches, and

water nymphs or Rusalky appeared. The Rusalky were young girls, who had died in an unnatural way. They resided under water, and emerged on this summer day to roam the land. They had either a good or bad influence on the lives of people, the harvest, and the romantic fate of young (Zerebecky 12). Choreographically, the Kupalo took two forms, and centered on mythological themes. In Mavky, girls would dress up as forest nymphs and wore wreaths on their heads.

The dance consisted of jumping over a bonfire and throwing their wreaths into the water as an offering to the Mavky. This was done for the perpetuation of love, engagements, and fertility. If a couple jumped over the bonfire together hand in hand, it created a symbolic bond of matrimony. In Marena, a doll-like figure representing death was placed in the center of the circle. After dancing around this figure, the doll was taken to the water and drowned. This movement symbolized the drowning of death in order to immortalize love amidst young people (Shatulsky 21-2). Contemporary Ukraine

Contemporary Ukrainians descend from several Slavic tribes that occupied the land before the ninth century. Ukraine has striven to maintain its independence since the Mongol invasions eroded the domain of its medieval principates of Kyivan Rus and Halych-Volyn in the mid-fourteenth century. Throughout the following centuries, Ukrainians, on their own territory, fought off Crimean Tatars, Ottomans, Poles, Muscovites and Russians with varying degrees of success. After losing the Battle of Poltava in 1709 central and eastern Ukraine became a colony of the Empire of all Russias created by the Muscovite Tsar, Peter the First (Beauplan 19).

At this time western Ukraine was a vassal territory of the Polish kingdom. After Poland's third partition, western Ukraine became a crown land of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from the eighteenth century till the end of World War I. After a brief period of independence at the end of World War I, eastern and central Ukraine were reabsorbed into the Russian Empire's successor, the Soviet Union. After World War II, western Ukraine was integrated into the Soviet Ukrainian Republic, reuniting almost all Ukrainian ethnic territories in one state, albeit a colonial one.

Ukraine announced its sovereignty in 1990 and its independence in 1991 (Beauplan 21). Different cultural aspects, such as dialects, songs, dances, embroidery designs, specific variations in dress, and visual designs for pysanky and ceramics can identify Ukraine's regions. Each region's designs, songs, and dances are recognized as such, but may be applied or performed in other areas of Ukraine. All of the regions share the Ukrainian language and cyclic traditions such as Christmas carols, the Christmas *didukh* (a decorative sheath of wheat that symbolizes the souls of deceased family members).

Spring songs and dances, the blessing of Easter baskets filled with food, and the twelve course Christmas Eve dinner. The regional differences lie in variations on each food; for example, some regions put rose water or rose preserves into *kutia* (Porter 35-7). Some regional elements have been popularized in other regions, such as the song "Pelms" that is originally from Poltava in central Ukraine, but is popular even among Hutsuls in southwestern Ukraine. The song was part of the popular operetta *Natalka Poltavka*, which incorporated traditional songs.

The operetta was performed throughout Ukraine, which led to the popularization of Poltava songs in other regions. The bandura instrument and the kobzar tradition hail from central Ukrainian regions, but are widely practiced in both western and eastern regions. The kobzari (plural of kobzar), traveling bards, traveled widely and so the repertoire from their regions became known in other regions to Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians (Porter 39). Ukrainian traditional culture, or what is commonly known as folk culture, is village-oriented not only from a nostalgic point of view.

The culture is village-oriented because up until thirty years ago, the bulk of its population was actually rural. In 1989, the Ukrainian census counted over 51 million inhabitants in Ukraine (Beauplan 33). Today, Ukraine has a population of many ethnicities. The newly independent nation has tried to fulfill the desires of the Ukrainian population to support Ukrainian culture, language, and history, and at the same time support the minority ethnicities. Many of the minorities are advocates of an independent Ukraine and support Ukrainian as the official language, but they demand to have their cultural independence as well (Beauplan 37).

Despite the Russification, Ukrainians have remained ethnically and culturally separate from Russians. In particular, western Ukraine, which had fewer centuries of Russian domination than its eastern-central brethren, exhibited a very strong resistance to Russification. For example, the Hutsuls of the Carpathian Mountains exemplify this resistance by virtue of their strong ethnic awareness and the preservation of traditional rituals. These sociological aspects have been and are common in other regions of Ukraine, but they are not as intensely apparent as among the Hutsuls (Beauplan 169).

Pavlo Virsky, a great dancer, who established National Folk Dance Ensemble, is a prominent example of the Ukrainian cultural heritage. Ukrainian Dance Ukrainians, differ from other Slavic cultures in their focus on individual rather than group dance. Except for the Hutsul arkan, a men's group dance, and divocha, a women's group dance, Ukrainian dance showcases individuals or mixed couples. In most of the mixed couple dances the man and woman will each dance different steps or figures simultaneously, as opposed to the coordinated kolo circle dances, of the Balkans.

In between the step changes, the Ukrainian couple may dance the same steps simultaneously. Ukrainian dance can be split into two categories based on the physical requirements of the dance: less kinetic or stately processional dance, and more kinetic or gymnastic dance. The less kinetic dance is called khorovid, literally "choral walk." Khorovody (plural of khorovid) are always accompanied by the singing of participants and onlookers, which gives the dance its name (Zerebecky 72).

In Ukraine, traditional dance was reserved for adults. Dancing includes steps that are both female and male and include crossovers, stomps, lifts, kicks, and leg touches. Most dances are danced in a circle with variations on the ways in which the dancers join arms to form the circle. In several of the dances, one of the males will be assigned to make directional calls. Hutsul dancing is performed in a narrow frame and some have theorized that the narrowness is due to the limited physical space that the Hutsul has in the mountains.

The dancing is performed with a flat foot, with little bounce. Except for one dance, the group does not make use of any staged theatrics (Shatulsky 23). These are the more archaic types of dance and are tied to rituals, such as spring rituals, the pagan Kupalo festival, and New Year's. The dance steps are restrained, with no jumps or bounces, and may be abstract or mimetic. The abstract choreography can be a line, circle, two circles, or half circle, and sometimes includes props, such as wreaths or a decorated branch.

Mimed text usually includes choreography of two groups, or solo and group. The theme of the texts, which dictates the choreography, could be about work, hardship, family life, or nature. The texts about nature are either about its beauty or personify natural phenomenon. Songs that have a dialogue-like text are often formulaic and the dance steps mime the text. The text is related to Ukrainian descriptive language and mirrors a variety of life situations; therefore, khorovody are considered not only artistic, but also historical (Zerebecky 75).

Khorovody songs of mostly scale-wise melodies are within a narrow range and have repetitive patterns. They can be either monophonic or polyphonic. The recitative-like character of the songs is determined by the prosodic characteristics of the text. Most major melodies have a faster tempo than the minor melodies. The texts of the major melodies are generally more cheerful, while the texts of the minor melodies are more solemn. Most songs are in duple meter, but some of the songs with a workaday theme have slow introductions in a triple meter.

These introductions, either major or minor, are followed by a faster major section that returns to the common duple meter (Shatulsky 27). Khorovody are performed informally while celebrating a holiday and as part of ancient rituals, such as Easter and Kupalo, respectively. The festival, represents the search for one's mate. Rituals include girls making wreaths, singing specific Kupalo songs, and placing the flower wreaths on a river or creek bidding them to find them a love.

The boys, either standing in the body of water or at the opposite bank, depending what is available and what practicality allows, take a wreath out of the water and then find the girl who braided it. The couple remains together for the rest of the festival, which begins at dusk and may last until sunrise. Couples dance khorovody, sing Kupalo songs, and jump over a bonfire, attempting to hold hands and not let go as they jump, a signifier that they will remain together for life (Shatulsky 32).