Dance in the Yugoslav area, traces of archetypes
Modernization of folk dance

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Since the ancient times, the artists have endeavored to eternize dance in their work. Though, so many times sang of, described, pictured, carved into a stone, dance remains just a reflection of personal experience or presentation of either a moment or a form of this art. Because of its two equally strong components, physical and psychic, the very essence of dance has always been a secret. Since the ancient cultures to nowadays, it has been a matter of guessing and philosophic discussions.

In the latest times, dance has become the subject of many researches, which is helpful in tracing its pre-motives. Archaeological and anthropological discoveries as well as ethnology brought more light to prehistoric beginnings of dance, while thanks to psychology, medicine and social theories we were able to obtain further knowledge of it. Sharp differences as in historic approaches, considerations and hypotheses as in opinions of philosophers and artists, demonstrate depth and volume of the dance problems.

In the light of the fact that dancer is at the same time creator, performer and material of his work of art, the dance problems seem far more complex. Because, before placing an extraneous matter between him and his experience, or before taking any instrument to process it, by himself and from his inner self, by body movements, a man had created and rhythmically formed contents of his feelings, thoughts and prejudices of imagined and presented world.

This dance became art through conscious repeating of reactions and through a process of transforming experiences into symbols. Mind has always been a constant source of ideas, whether good or bad, rational or fantastic. The artist creates his works and the product of his creation ceases from being a spontaneous reaction to experiences at one point of time, becoming their symbolically modeled presentation. This presentation differs from a spontaneous one just like each real event differs from its interpretation. An artistic dance is now directed by imagined senses, not the true ones. Anyway, spontaneous actions can neither be exactly remembered, nor each detail can be reproduced precisely.

The dance becomes a conscious product of human mind, possible to remember and to reproduce. Also, by introducing symbols, the dance gets new dimension, because the dancer no more expresses himself. He has his own transformation and intimate experience, but specific motive of creation is in fact a common human message. Dance is no more property of its performer, but it belongs to all his spectators, which wakes equally in all of them memories of similar experiences.

A supposition that dance and music were always united comes from the fact that unintentional moving caused by strong excitement had to result in phonation, and oppositely, with cry a man simultaneously makes an adequate movement.

For hundreds of years, a mutual characteristic of dance and music was their instantaneousness. Until today, when we are technically equipped to record and reproduce artistic creations, a movement and voice were like waves of light and sound lost forever as soon as they got created. Since they are never identically reproduced, they suffered numerous changes and variations in the course of civilization development.

Just like music, dance was able to lead us to a state of trance, which was helpful in communicating with incomprehensible forces. The first, authentic evidences on joining music and dance together can be found in primitive and magic rituals. Noises of steps or stressed foot beating were the first sound reflections of dance. Then followed clapping, knocking on different parts of the body, which would have resulted in diverse sound effect each time. The first instrument to a man was his own body. After, he started to utilize other drumsticks and instead of his bear arms and legs, used another aids.

Union of sound and movement is still present in Yugoslav folk dance. Therefore, in some dances, variations of steps, jewel clinking and component parts of national costume produce the rhythm. With a performer, dance amplifies music, while a spectator gets synchronous hearing and visual impression of crescendo, until calming.
In each époque and social movement, people gathered together to dance. The rhythm of dance always caused joy and psychical élan. The forms of social dance have constantly been changing according to time and surroundings. They were dominated sometimes by relaxed movements of swaying, and sometimes by more rigid, organized and aesthetic ones. Everyone must have experienced the influence of dance, probably someone even euphoria of dancing rhythm, if not as an adult or a young person, then as a child. The same way the children experience the influence of dance, our ancestors did. Surprised by the state of their body and spirit, unconsciously caused, they attributed supernatural power to a dance. In order to revoke this primary euphoria, people used to repeat the steps unconsciously faster and with more and more passion. This produced undreamt excitement and pleasure.

Dancing to the limits of ecstasy probably exists even today, where one can recognize the motive of fear and uncertainty and the reason of which in ancient times was ignorance while today are inventions of human kind that are threatening the world. Decor of modern civilization of the 20th century in music and dance brought back a catching rhythm and mass dance a newer form.

Fortunately, man was always longing to consciously modelled forms of dance. According to some philosophers, power of the dance was weakened by its connecting with art. Dancer develops his conscious of his body, movement and sense produced by moving. In relation to other stage artists, he was always richer in the sense of unique movement experience.

In the course of history, a dancer fast became a performer, only. His dance is learnt, not authentic. It is descended. The art is in quicker learning and better presentation of old choreography. Traditional dance, performed by a larger group, often left very little space for introducing personal artistic attitude. Nevertheless, individual interpretation was not lost and with time passing it became a criterion of dancer’s capability and artistic feature.

Through the process of dancer’s creativity, creators reach the level in which they imagine and create the work of art for others instead of performing it by themselves. In primitive societies the creators of new dances were thought to have had supernatural powers. In our civilization of professionalism in dancing, choreographers transmit their conception to dancers. Dance becomes a thoughtful product of human psyche and by constant repeating of its instantaneousness it is preserved as the most direct artistic expression, a celebration of body and spirit.

Dance originating from natural needs, dance originating from the most complex psychical motives, dance in which a man gets lost or found, dance as spontaneous self-expression or dance as a complete work of mind, remains the phenomena, which besides all expert explanations, contains the dimension of incomprehensible.

In the life of ancient Slav peoples, dance had as important role as with other ethnic groups all over the world. The manner of expressing unusual energy of living but also the expression of all their spirit was involved in.

In mostly static peasant culture, dance represented the most dynamic element of aesthetic expression. It is difficult to part Slav from not-Slav elements because the elements of their own culture are, due to migrations, mixed with the influences of foreign ones. On the other hand, the beginnings are clear and are reflected in Yugoslav national customs. A part of human cultural inheritance is kept in Yugoslav folk dance.

In spite the influence of Christian church, people here did not give up pagan believes, which led to mixture of motives and transformation of the most important pagan rituals into Christian holidays.

As with other ethnic groups, the ancient Slavs cherished the cult of Sun, Water and Fire. Closeness of spring as a favourite place for dancing and direction of folk round dance (kolo) is directly connected with imagined circular path, which Sun makes on the sky. Also, being farmers, the Slavs considered the cult of vegetation and fertility, astral cult and cult of nature, to be very important.

In 1908, in the area of Zajecar in Serbia, a great dryness happened. Peasants believed that the dryness was caused by a huge dragon that comes to date peasant women. They decided to put and end to all that. On holiday Ivandan, at midnight, the men gathered together at the cemetery, made fire and danced around it a “witches’ dance” (vrzino kolo). Afterwards, they ran around the village, making great noise with bells, haunting the demon-dragon towards the cemetery, where they danced their spooky dance, once more.

Other documented case took place in village of Dobro Polje. In order to invoke the rain, young men were dancing folk round dance (kolo) naked by night, and spilled troughs full of water. On Yugoslav soil, one can also find a case of ritual invoking, "making" rain, which is confided to chosen persons. They have to be clean and innocent, so children are often chosen for the main characters of the ritual. Differently from other rituals,
invoking of rain is not performed on certain days of the year, but only then when weather circumstances are demanding.

Religious and magic rituals in all the agricultural countries, and all around the year, were heading towards the main goal - fertile year and successful harvest. They wanted to ensure fertility, and to celebrate it after the harvest works, by dancing and singing in special celebrations full of joy and colours.

There are many dances from Slavonija and Backa, that resemble old customs performed for return of harvesters in the village, with great celebration, colourful costumes decorated with flowers and ears of wheat. Dances also resemble rituals of initialization youth to adults. Basic law of every human community, especially in countryside, has been preserved with many peoples. Time has vanished the complexity and long duration of ceremonies, so this ancient ritual is present in a far moderate manner in some parts of Yugoslavia. Young person, ready to become an adult, is bound to dance in their folk round dance (kolo) for the first time.

Social meaning of folk round dance (kolo), as an intimate circle of country community, once more is acknowledged as a specific announcement of readiness of young women for marriage.

The most intensive dances of erotic character are, by far, dances in pairs. They can be performed by many pairs simultaneously, two pairs or one. Older are ones without physical contact, and newer ones are those in which pairs are holding their hands or each other's shoulders. They can be mimes, like "katanka" dance from around town of Nis, which expresses love game followed with instrumental music, or purely dancing, like folk round dance (kolo) from Ohrid area, which is a strong choreographic dialogue between boy and girl.

Besides Serbia and Macedonia, these love duets are found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where oriental influence is clear, and particularly expressive is choreographically original Montenegro dance for two. That is dance in strong patriarchic spirit, without touching, where a man, full of strength, boldly jumps, while a woman, with eyes to the ground, virtuously performs small steps. In one version of the dance, it does not stop, only young couples change. Male and female dance face-to-face, symbolizing eagle and swallow. Eagle tries to catch swallow, while she flies fast, escaping under his wings. All the games of this type express strength, so in some parts of Vojvodina, bride proves her health and physical ability by dancing on her wedding.

Mixed folk round dances (kola) in closed circle where dancers are tightly connected, hands crossed in front or behind their backs, also have erotic context. Such folk round dance (kolo) is sometimes split to pairs, as in Eastern Serbia, where has once happened that a boy took a girl out of folk round dance (kolo), and disappeared with her.

In folklore tradition of Yugoslavia, a very important place is taken by wedding dances, where some of ancient elements have not been forgotten and lost, but preserved until today. For example, dances for three persons, or bride's obligation to dance with all the guests have their roots in times of group marriage.

Motive that keeps showing in wedding dances and rituals, from ancient times, is kidnapping of a girl. In Montenegro, wedding procession is under arms. In Serbia and on Kosovo, young dancer is stolen, and then is symbolically captured by the hands of dancers that form an arc, or two confronted open folk round dances (kola) are formed, so that the dance provokes a quarrel, proposition failure, and kidnapping of girl.

In villages around Leskovac, there is still a connection between marriage accomplishment and a cult of water. Early in the morning, a bride goes to a well or a spring, followed by musicians, girls and women. With lot of joy, she fills decorated jars, throw coins in water, and they all dance folk round dance (kolo), afterwards. Many rituals and specific dances were invented to protect young couple from dangers of visible and invisible forces. So in Srem, we have different disguise dances, with a purpose of confusing demons, blackening the faces of wedding guest and dance on a crossroad, cutting pillows and dance with feathers, as a life symbol.

In Nis, a bride led folk round dance (kolo) around a tree, which probably originates from an ancient belief that fertility of a tree would expand on people. In area around Valjevo, brides led kolo around their houses, before wedding, honouring it by bowing down at the front doors. In area of Vrsac, after wedding ceremony, folk round dance (kolo) called "oro" is danced by fire. In few cases on Kosovo and in Macedonia, there are dances with sabres, fighting the invisible forces.

Dances with combat motifs, real weapons and imaginary enemy, are present until today in Southern Adriatic coast. The example is a traditional, men's chain dance of navy in Boka Kotorska, which originates from the early 9th century and is performed in honour of St. Trepan. In fact, it is a presentation of transfer the relics of St. Trepan from Asia Minor i.e. important undertaking of the army and is performed in front of the church of that Saint.
Several men’s dances, performed on Kosovo with scarves or wooden sticks, in fact are performed with swards.

It is though unknown whether these dances were of combat or ritual character.

Yugoslav folklore is plenty of folk customs related to the cult of animals. Orthodox church preserved pagan customs and believes in this field, too, but modified them by giving each myth animal one saint protector. Thus, in Serbian villages, St. Sava is considered to be a protector of wolves, St. Andrew a protector of bears, St. Vasilis a protector of oxen, and the day of St. Theodore is the feast of the patron saint (slava) of horses. Snake ceremonies were performed on Lazarus Saturday. In the Yugoslav folklore a bear represents a demon of nature or fertility. A dance with mask of bear is often connected to spring celebrations.

In Serbia we meet various dances and ceremonies in purpose of defending a village from wolves. The cult of snake was present in South Serbia and Montenegro. Eventually in those dances artificial snakes made of pearls changed real snakes. These dances had manifold meanings. In some parts of Serbia, snakes were made to go away by the dance of young women with bells. The noise made by diverse metal objects is also present in the dances of Vojvodina, accompanied with making fire and dancing around village homes. In the Western Serbia we find folk dance ”Peacock” (Paun), which is in fact mixed, closed or open round dance (kolo) danced on weddings and after harvest ending. The motive of birds is present in the area of river Nisava, too.

The geographic formation of Yugoslav soil influenced the division of folk dances performed during the work, without any solemn motive, into dances characteristic for areas with hills, hillocks and planes. The dance during the work or later the dance that imitates all phases in carrying out some work, is present in all the regions. Harvest or mow was almost always performed followed by music in the rhythm of the work. In Montenegro, during picking corn or fruits one would have danced. In some regions, exclusively women’s round dances (kola) during spinning of wool or preparing some meals, are typical.

This abridged choice of remainders and traces of ancient dance motives, clearly points at deeper sense of folk dances. Besides all the aesthetic values of these, nowadays significantly modified dances, their roots lead us to conscious and unconscious, resolved and unresolved living problems of people. Today, the conditions and rhythm of modern life have created a need for a new way of presenting a folk dance. With a tendency to preserve the originality of folklore it should be made closer and clearer to a very young public.

In possible transformations of folklore, which can be made in the aim of adjustment to the speed of our times, all the dances and customs should be preserved, like Christian Church did with pagan customs, but also made much more interesting and effective on the stage.

Young public of the era of computers, films, scene spectacle, modern machines and technical aids, in the world with no geographic distances and no incomprehensive natural powers, often cannot understand or enjoy the dance for rain or the dance, which celebrates harvest. On the other hand, such cultural inheritance of the mankind is duty of all generations. Folklore and tradition is something that must be known, understood and descended.

Artists and choreographers are faced with a complex assignment to preserve old ideas, motives and steps and at the same time to enrich the dance by adding new scene-technical and choreographic possibilities. Adjustment of a traditional folk dance to a present moment would be an intriguing motive to a new audience to follow and understand dance, revealing customs, cults, fears and hopes of their ancestors, at the same time.

Dance must preserve its original significance, where creator himself shares his feeling with the audience and transmits the common message of mankind by his movements. Today, it is a message of modern world, so rich in history and cultural inheritance.

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