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**DANCE AND IDENTITY: THE  
FOLK DANCE SCENE IN THE  
REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA  
BETWEEN 1975-2005**

**Key words:** stereotype, folk dance scene, Macedonia, social, ethnic, multiethnic concept, minorities, multicultural identity.

'Don't sing in Bosnia! Don't dance in Serbia! Neither sing nor dance in Macedonia!' (a Yugoslav saying)

This saying, this paremiological form, is one of the great Yugoslav stereotypes about the musical and folk identity of the Macedonians in the socialist period. Regardless of whether this is a case of a *local* or *regional* identity, it certainly is the least challenged identity of all. For this very reason, we are interested in establishing how, from being the 'best-dancers' and 'best singers' in former Yugoslavia, the Macedonians have arrived at a uniform dance repertoire of 5 types of 'oro' performed on social occasions suitable for dance, and how they have arrived at not more than 15 thematically different *folklore choreographies* to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the institutionalized folk dance scene in Macedonia?

*Why is this folk dance scene our subject of research?*

We will start from the premise that folk music and dance are in continuum the promoters of the process of build-

ing ethnic and national identity, not only of Macedonians but also of all other ethnic minority communities in Macedonia. This folk dance scene unifies in the best way the issues of the complexities of the sometimes divergent processes of building the national and cultural identity of our country.

Through the system of the folk dance scene we can observe:

- The process of building national identity with the involvement of various social, political and cultural organizations in the process of the institutionalization of the folk dance scene;
- The dominant cultural and political concepts in which our traditional culture, including folk culture, has existed in Macedonia;
- The varied structure of its promoters (one professional ensemble as opposed to numerous amateur Cultural Artistic Associations);
- The images of social life reflected in this scene? (which cultural history has been remembered; which history has been forgotten);
- The forms of its existence (in hierarchically ordered festivals, competitive regional and state reviews, events, celebrations of state holidays, etc.);
- Through the quality of the folk dance scene, the issue of the quality of education in this sphere can also be observed;
- The treatment and attitude of the media and the public toward this type of culture;
- The unavoidable issue of the means of supporting and representing the minority cultures.

Due to limited space, this essay fo-

cuses only on the three different state concepts regarding this type of culture, especially in the period between 1975 and 2005 as a period in which these three concepts intertwined.

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Within every society, there exist lines of real and potential conflict between its majority members and its minorities,<sup>10</sup> which rarely enjoy equality. This social inequality is manifest through the different types of culture, including folk culture. In the same way that group domination has its dimensions and forms, so does resistance to this domination find forms of action through the very same culture and art. In the process of self-identification and redefinition of the collective identities of the majority and the minorities, folk dance culture in Macedonia has played a central role in the building of the subjective sense of ethnic, religious and other types of affiliation. These forms of cultural competition have often demonstrated emotions such as patriotism, racism, elitism, nationalism, etc. and have therefore been related to the collective identification of the identity of one's self.

Folk music and dance culture has been identified by the political elites in Macedonia in both periods of socialism and post-socialism as one of the particularly important factors in the process of building of national identity. Research reveals that folk dance

10. Jordan, G. & Weedon, Ch. 1995, *Cultural Politics - Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World*; Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

within its institutional framework<sup>11</sup> represented more a form of mass education and propagandist activity than a leisure activity for the 'working people', with an aim to improve the 'productive forces of labour'.<sup>12</sup> The ideological background behind the existence of a social strata of the 'working class', the 'working people', provide the first concept for a folk scene in Macedonia which had a *social dimension*. 'Brotherhood and Unity' was one of the basic guiding thoughts in the organization of the folk dance scene in which workers participated from all ethnic and religious communities that lived and worked on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia. The only distinction made was between professional and amateur performers.

As a professionalized activity, folk dance was defined as one of the branches of *labour culture*. In fact, the ensemble for folk songs and dances 'Tanec' was officially registered as an organization of associated labour.<sup>13</sup> With a decree of the Government of the People's Republic of Macedonia (NRM), from 24 March 1949 (published in the Official Register from 4 April 1949), the ensemble for folk dances and songs of Macedonia 'Tanec' was founded with

11. In the socialist period, every larger factory, agricultural combine or a producing cooperative were stimulated to organize 'cultural entertainment' for their workers.

12. 'Workers' Cultural Life in the Associated Labour' - *A Report on the activities of the Council of the Union Alliance of Macedonia in the Period between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of SSM*, Skopje, 1978, pp. 46.

13. 'Tanec' - *Skopje: a Monograph to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ensemble*, Skopje, pp. 3.

the aim 'to discover the hitherto hidden, suppressed and assimilated cultural wealth and to show the world who and what we are'. As a professional state ensemble, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, in the year of its establishment, with a separate article of the Decree, its basic tasks were determined as follows:

- a) To cultivate and improve the artistic importance of folk dances;
- b) To cultivate, adapt and develop folk songs;
- c) To prepare programs with folk dances and songs and to present them at public artistic performances

In addition to this, there existed a wide network of amateur cultural artistic associations which belonged to the sphere of what was called **cultural self-activities**, identified today with the notion of **cultural amateurism**.<sup>14</sup> Together, the two forms (professional and amateur) of organization of the folk dance scene were planned, analyzed and realized in the sphere of culture, in parallel with the activities in the education ('enlightenment' in the terminology of the time) and information (propagandist activities) of the workers. 'Folk culture'<sup>15</sup> was perceived as a

14. The Ministry of Culture, 2004, *National Program for Culture for the Period 2004-2008*, Skopje, p. 16.

15. The term folk culture (with the exception of the small academic community of several related disciplines in the area of social sciences) was almost identical in the public mind with the dancing of the folk 'oro'. Almost all activities are unified in this term in a simplified manner: the dancing of the folk 'oro', the creation of folk choreographies, organizational, repertory and similar activities in relation to this area of dance—a simplification which is completely wrong.

key for the preservation of our historical 'roots', folk dances were identified with 'documents', 'testimonies', 'truthful annals' of the Macedonian life through the centuries of enslavement.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, folk music and dance were channeled within a broad network of various 'leisure activities' identified as an important factor in the 'most important' battle 'for the development of the production forces'<sup>17</sup> without any emphasis on the ethnic segment which is unavoidable when discussing this cultural phenomenon. The folk dance scene in the period of the domination of this social concept between the 1950s and 1970s was homogenous: there was only one network of festivals, reviews, tours and other state occasions when folk 'oro' were danced – while the ethnic structure of the ensembles (both professional and amateur) was heterogeneous, with exception of the repertory politics which was predominantly Macedonian.

With the new 1974 Constitution of socialist Yugoslavia and the introduction of the minority cultures on the

16. Tome Sazdov 1979, *Macedonian Song and Dance, 'Tanec' - Skopje, a Monograph to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ensemble*, Skopje.

17. a. 'The Union Alliance in the Development of the Education, Science, Cultural Life and Information of the Workers' - *A Report on the activities of the Council of the Union Alliance of Macedonia in the Period between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Congress of SSM*, Skopje, 1978, pp. 46.

b. In the papers from the 25<sup>th</sup> assembly of the Union Alliance of Macedonia, the Municipal Council Bitola, from March 1979, on page 46, it is stated that culture and self-activities should be re-integrated within the society in accordance with new Law for Associated Labour from 1974.

Yugoslav social scene,<sup>18</sup> an *ethnic differentiation* was initiated on the folk dance scene in Macedonia. This meant that the dominant principle of its organization became the *ethnic* principle. This concept has been in full swing since 1975 until the present. Retaining the same formal organization, the folk dance scene acquired a new look through:

1. The repertory policy of the cultural artistic associations. The creators of their repertoires had to reduce a section of their offer of traditional dances and songs in order to meet the obligation to present the 'folk culture' of the other 'brotherly peoples and nationalities' (in the terminology of the time). Thus, a selection was made of one or two 'oro' dances and songs as symbolic of each ethnicity in socialist Yugoslavia—which produced the most popular choreography of the time called '*Yugoslavia*'. We can find symbolism in the setting of the partisan oro 'Kozara' at the beginning of that choreography which symbolically represented the 'beginning' of the new state as a creation different from its predecessor (the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). Almost without exception, folk ensembles either started or finished their concerts with this choreography.

In this attempt to create a *prototype* for each ethnic identity in former Yugoslavia, the contrasting oro *Lesno-*

18. Realization of international relations - *Tasks of the Communists' League of Macedonia in the Further Development of the Relations of Socialist Self-Management (basis for preparation of political documents and positions for the Seventh Congress of the Communist League of Macedonia)*, Skopje, January 1978, p. 39.

*to* (the easy) and *Teskoto* (the difficult) dances were selected as a prototype of the Macedonian 'oro' dance, commonly performed on the Yugoslav folk scene at the time and represented in Yugoslav encyclopedias.

2. In addition to this, at folk festivals, folk reviews and state holidays, cultural and artistic associations of Vlach, Roma, Turkish and Albanian ethnic origin participated in the performance with their own local dancing repertory.



Photograph 1: *Celebratory concert on the occasion of the 'Day of Youth' and Josip Broz Tito's birthday, Struga, 25.05, 1976.* © Ivona Opetčeska -Tatarčevska

The need for presentation of the ethnic identity different from that of the majority was obvious as early as the late 1960s. The Vlachs in Struga, beginning with 1968, organized annual gatherings in a form of a friendly socializing naming it 'Vlach evening'. The same people formed in 1971 the amateur association 'Friends of Gorna Belica' which cultivated Vlach traditional dances and songs from the village Gorna Belica, Struga. Through self-financing, they managed to reconstruct the traditional Vlach wedding in order to preserve their separate cultural and ethnic iden-

tity for future generations. However, despite their self-aware expression of their ethnicity, at the State Review of folklore in Zagreb—the largest federal event for this type of culture at the time—they did not refer to themselves with their registered name, but only as representatives of Struga.



Photograph 2: *The Vlach Association 'Friends of Gorna Belica' at a Folklore Review in Zagreb 1974.*

© Ivona Opetčeska-Tatarčevska

The reasons for such self-presentation lie in the fact that the political and police structures in the period between 1971 and 1974 reacted negatively to their initiative for this type of socializing and the organizers and founders of the association were summoned for interviews by the police, while the workers who were active members of the association were intimidated by their employers.<sup>19</sup>

The third and last concepts, still operational today, did not exclude the

19. Source: Dana Pano, born in 1937 in the village of Gorna Belica, resident of Struga.

ethnicization of the scene, but also attempted unification of the ethnically polarized folk dance scene in order to render it multicultural.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, in Macedonia after 2001 this concept has become in practice almost bi-cultural. As a basic idea in Macedonian society, this concept was promoted after the secession of Macedonia from socialist Yugoslavia with the referendum for independence on 8 September 1991. Through numerous projects in the social, ecological and cultural sphere, predominantly funded by foreign foundations, the strong network of non-governmental organizations introduced the *multicultural* concept in the mid-1990s. The state itself promoted the multi-ethnic concept of Macedonian culture in 2003 in the shape of the *National Program for Culture from 2004 until 2008*. In this program, the multicultural character of the state, as well as its development and the cooperation with the non-governmental sector, are promoted as one of the priority commitments.<sup>21</sup> Not only have its basic principles—*accessibility, versatility* (including the concept of multicultural identity), *openness, accountability, flexibility*, not been implemented within Macedonian society four years after its adoption, but in practice a ghettoized parallel and extremely polarized scene has been created, structured conditionally, in accordance with the percentage ratio of each ethnic minority—in fact in accordance with some other non-institutional parameters. Despite the

20. Ministry of Culture, 2004, *National Program for Culture from 2004 until 2008*, Skopje, pp. 13, 21.

21. *Ibid.* pp.13,15,21,35.

fact that Macedonia as a state formally creates legal mechanisms for the better operation of this scene through:

- A special department for folklore amateurism, which has operated within the Ministry of Culture since 2005,
- The Office for Development and Improvement of the Culture of the Minority Communities since 2002,
- The department for traditional dances within the State Musical and Ballet School 'Ilija Nikolovski Luj' in Skopje,
- The Department for Ethno-Choreography at the State University 'Goce Delčev' in Štip,
- the funding for 130 Cultural and Artistic Associations, 6 national festivals and funding for over 35 local events in the area of folk music and dance, we nevertheless cannot claim that the Macedonian folk dance scene has made a qualitative step forward either from an artistic or structural standpoint.

Indeed, it may be claimed that the only step forward at present is in the direction of negative commercialization and politicization, mostly as a consequence of the lack of criteria and mechanisms for assessment of the realized programs. This is certainly a result of the overall constellation of relationships within Macedonian society, some of the factors for such development being a product of a cultural policy which for long recognized only *a priori authorities* in the areas which shape this scene, such as education and cultures, and avoided real competition which would have brought about a respectable system of values.

The second liberalization of the folk dance scene after 2001 was ex-

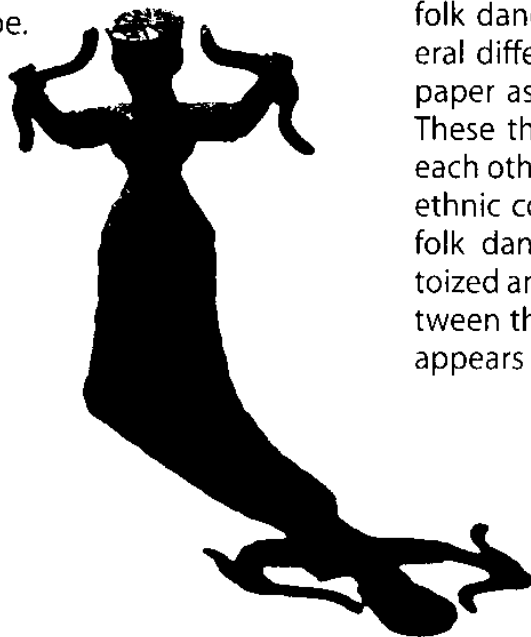
ploited by the minority communities to promote their own political ideas in the name of their struggle for minority rights. The number of festivals for folk dances has grown beyond the financial resources of the state, but the minority leaders interpreted the state funding/ or not funding of these festivals as a sign of respect or disrespect of their minority rights. For this purpose, in 2002 the government founded the *Office for the Development and Improvement of the Culture of the Minority Communities* whose aim was to balance these tendencies. But in practice this office is almost dysfunctional, while the public is satisfied with its formal existence. Macedonians considered this as an establishment of parallelism in the state administration.

The absence of any critical assessment of all these phenomena, either by experts or by the ordinary public, has resulted in an empty glorification of the folk scene, building the stylized folk dance and music into a 'non-written history' by melodramatic reiterations such as the following:

'We, the Macedonians do not have pyramids and Sphinxes, our fatherland is not adorned with palaces and material monuments, but we have something which neither centuries, nor natural catastrophes, nor the daemonic hand of the tyrants could destroy... This unbreakable force is contained in our only monument – the folk song, the richest and the most valued heritage left to us from the past life and culture of the Macedonians, surviving until the present.' (the most commonly quoted extract concerning the impor-

tance of the musical folklore; from the Preface to the *Collection of Macedonian Folk Songs* by Josif Češmedžiev, Sofia, 1926).

Nevertheless, research to date has demonstrated that the folk dance scene, set in the context of building national and cultural identity, has been and remains one of the great politically instigated cultural projects and has been, in a way, to the benefit to all its participants. The building of identity through culture is only a process of various negotiations, and often political manipulations, in which the ordinary person makes his or her choice in different circumstances while the cultural institutions are those which promote the agenda of the state. Regardless of the transformations in social and political relationships, the cultural policy of the Macedonian state attempts to transform its heterogeneous folk dance scene not only through the process of decentralization of local self-government but also through its involvement in the creation of the state brand in all its processes for speedier integration within Europe.



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### Dance and Identity

Every society has its lines of real or potential conflict between the ethnic and cultural majority and the minorities. These relations are rarely equal, and this social inequality is balanced, among other things, through various types of culture, including folk culture. Cultural relations are an area of manifestation of emotions (patriotism, nationalism, elitism, etc.) and therefore are involved in the constitution of collective identities. The folk dance scene plays a central role in the building of subjective identity, in the confirmation of separate ethnic identities and of meta-ethnic national identity. Both the subject and collectives respond to the various attempts for construction/reconstruction or marginalization of their existing identities. Therefore, the central subject of this paper is that of the forms of cultural dialogue within the context of the folk dance scene in the Republic of Macedonia in the period between 1975 and 2005 and the processes of their transformation. Within the framework of Macedonian state cultural policy, the folk dance scene survived through several different concepts identified in this paper as *social*, *ethnic* and *multicultural*. These three concepts do not invalidate each other but exist in parallel, albeit the ethnic concept is still predominant. The folk dance scene is increasingly ghettoized and the opening of a dialogue between the cultures existing in our space appears as the only solution.