

A 'BALKAN FOLK DANCE' PHENOMENON IN THE UNITED STATES: A FEW ANALYTICAL OBSERVATIONS¹

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The purpose of this paper is to share some analytical observations on Balkan folk dance² activities in the United States. It is to present, together with documentary data, data from my experience as a folk dance researcher and dance teacher. It raises questions about the situation today in terms of participants, dance instructors and repertoire in comparison to the peak of Balkan folk dancing in the 1960s and '70s. It argues that the American Balkan folk dance phenomenon—a complex American cultural phenomenon—relates to factors like fashion. The repertoire today is also influenced by recent immigrants from the Balkans, among whom there are many professional musicians and choreographers, introducing sometimes neo-folk music and newly created choreographies.

Background of This Paper

It took several years and thousands of miles of travel before reaching the point when I could draw conclusions with self-confidence. Besides observations, notes, audio and video documents and active participation in a variety of music and dance events since 2003, I was asking people—folk dance lovers who were my hosts, drivers, food-providers, supporters (many of them, I am happy to say, became my friends later)—a variety of questions related to the American Balkan phenomenon. In parallel to informal conversations and formal interviews, in the period 2004-2008 I collected data through a 'Balkan Dance Questionnaire'. In the updated electronic forms (2007 and 2008), together with the questions about gender, date and place of birth, ethnic and educational background, profession, and marital status, I asked folk dancers questions about their first involvement in folk dancing, the ethnic background of their first Bulgarian dance teacher, questions related to the repertoire, their ability to differentiate between choreographed patterns and village dances, their aptitude for achieving a particular style, characteristics of dances that stay in the repertoire, and a few more questions.

Meanwhile, I discovered a wonderful book entitled *Balkan Fascination* that is closely related to my area of research. This book was written by Bosnian ethnomusicologist Mirjana Laušević and published by Oxford University Press in 2007.

In the early 1990s, Laušević 'stumbled upon' the fact that a huge crowd of 'lily-white Americans', as they identified themselves in her interviews, regularly play, sing and dance to Balkan music in the heart of New York City. This was her original stimulus to conduct ethnomusicological research in order to understand this interesting phenomenon (Laušević 2007: 5-6). Among the questions in her survey and interviews, conducted predominantly from 1995 to 1997, I recognized many of the questions that I myself asked folk dancers ten years later in my own survey and interviews. While reading her book I realized that she had already tried to identify who these people are; which segment of American society they represent; what kind of Balkan music and dances they play, sing and dance; and why, how, where and when this Balkan trend started (Laušević 2007: 19). Not only that, but she also attempted to identify the teachers that introduced this music and dance to the U.S., recent trends in the development of these activities, and the general phenomenon viewed in the context of the political, economic and cultural milieu.

I am not going to repeat what was already written by Laušević. However, I cannot begin my paper without mentioning this particularly 'Balkan' research conducted in the United States³; in *Balkan Fascination* I found passionately interpreted and historically supported ideas and hypotheses that I welcomed and that provoked new thoughts in me.

Laušević died in 2008 at the age of 41. My personal reaction to her early death, and the fact that her topic, experience and passion closely resemble my topic and passion, made the work on my current text both emotional and difficult. I am not one who distantly observes, but one who brings Balkan music and dances to the States in person. To be an insider in a research field offers a great advantage. But there are also disadvantages: measurement of the right distance while analyzing data, and the ethical issue of discussing work of colleagues, while still being in the game. This is sometimes, as Bourdieu pointed out, a very uncomfortable position (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1992: 254). There are scholarly perspectives however that could help in solving such problems.

My 'Stumbling Upon' the American Balkan Folk Dance Phenomenon

My curiosity about the nature of Balkan folk dancing in the United States arose with the first folk dance event I attended at the Hungarian House in New York City in 2003. The American folk dancers managing the evening played one Bulgarian, Macedonian, Greek, Serbian, or Romanian, dance piece after another. While listening to some familiar tunes from Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, I believed I knew what the steps were and I was ready to jump into the crowd right away. It took a moment to realize that I had to be careful about jumping in. Often what I assumed a particular melody implied as dance steps was not exactly what I expected or was something I did not expect at all. I was questioning myself: Does this not-recognizing-'my' dances stem from lack of knowledge of my subject? Or was I witnessing choreographies which I had no way to be familiar with? Or was the answer that American folk dancers obviously had in their repertoire traditional Balkan dances, but they had also many new choreographed dances based on enjoyable Balkan music?

Questions Addressed in This Paper

I am focusing on three clusters of questions in this paper:

- Who are the dancers and what are their ethnic and educational backgrounds? Do they recognize differences between traditional dances and newly composed patterns and do they care? What is more important? Should dances be 'traditional' or 'fun'?
- Who are the teachers? Is it significant for the dancers if the Balkan dance instructor is American, Canadian, Dutch, etc., a man or woman, or if he/she was born, raised and educated somewhere in the Balkans?
- What kind of Balkan repertoire is the current one? Do the teachers typically conduct field research or reconstruct traditional dances from archives? Do they instead prefer to compose new dances in the general style of a particular Balkan tradition using 'interesting' music? Are the newly created dances introduced as such, or does this fact remain unmentioned?

The Balkan Scene in the United States

The roots of international folk dancing in the US, which are also roots of its Balkan folk dancing, may be traced to the start of the 20th century (Laušević 2007: 71-142). In the period 1930-1950 international folk dancing (IFD) was already established all over the country. The appearance in the 1930s of the dance groups of Michael Herman and Song Chang, at the World's Fairs in New York and San Francisco, respectively, gave great impetus to the movement (Laušević 2007: 163-169). Herman, Chang and Vytautas Beliajus, "Mr. Folk Dancer of America" (Filcich 1972: 29) are men who played main roles in the development of international folk dancing; these three, along with others of their generation, may be considered the grandparents of the Balkan scene (Laušević 2007: 143). The Balkan music and dance scene in the United States can be viewed in the context of many similar specialized affinity groups with a particular music and dance repertoire at their center (Laušević 2007: 17).

Dancers

Recognizing that the Balkan camp⁴ is associated with the Balkan village, and that this is central to the Balkan phenomenon in the States, Laušević conducted a survey in 1995 at Mendocino Balkan Music and Dance Camp in California. In 1994, a long-time participant in that camp, Melissa Miller, conducted a survey with 121 responses. Relying on data gathered by Laušević, Miller (Miller 1994), and myself, I can well conclude that despite differences between the average age of camp participants and the age of members of the weekly folk dance groups, as well as differences between the live music environment at the camps and the recorded music prevalent in weekly dance classes, there are numerous common characteristics among American Balkan folk dancers.

- Involvement in Balkan music and dance in America is generally not tied to the folk dancer's ethnic origin. Laušević pointed out that "their perception of their ethnic background, or lack of an ethnic background, is an important factor to their choice of this "adopted ethnicity." (Laušević 2007: 21; Shay 2008: 13).
- "Balkan music and dance lovers come from a very specific segment of American society; they are mostly white, urban, highly educated, professional people" (Laušević 2007: 25-26). The women are in the majority in this activity.
- Most of the people who are nowadays age 55-60 and beyond started folk dancing in their youth, in college, or in the local group when their first folk dance instructor was American.

Teachers

"Teachers go, but dancers stay, having an average of over 40 years of personal experience of folk dancing" (Houston 2007: 7). This statement about who stays and who goes in the folk dance scene may be viewed as a complex one. It is true that dance teachers physically leave but they (at least some of them) actually stay through music and dances they introduced, especially when the teacher's material becomes part of a dancer's everyday life and is adopted as part of its permanent repertoire. People remember some teachers not only because of the dances they bring to their life but because of their entire personality. Richard George ("Dick") Crum is a good example, although not the only one. He was a figure with an extremely influential impact on the development

of Balkan folk dancing in America, not only as an ethnographer, choreographer, dance teacher for recreational groups, but as a researcher with broad interests, intellect, multilingual skills, and encyclopedic knowledge (Leibman 2008: 5-11; Shay 2008: 13-14)⁵.

Dancers today, some of whom have over 40 years of personal experience, recognize other Balkan teachers' names – both American and non-American. There are younger contemporaries of Dick Crum who specialize in dances from a particular Balkan country and conduct field research in the Balkans.⁶ Typically, however, American dance teachers, who are group leaders also, teach Balkan dances as a part of their international folk dance repertoire. They teach primarily in their own group although some do travel around. How did they learn their repertoire?

Door County Festival in the Midwest could be taken as an example. The policy of this 30-year-old festival is: American folk dance leaders learn from other American folk dance leaders who teach what they have learned from eminent American and non-American dance instructors. Generally this has been the pathway for the folk dance repertoire to be disseminated among local folk dance groups for decades. This method of spreading the repertoire across the country is directly related to leaders' ability for learning and their personal dance styles; here many stylistic changes can be seen from one group to another. Changes may be observed in comparison with the way the original dance was introduced and the original style of the dance itself (especially if we are talking about traditional Balkan dance patterns).

If the main division in terms of who introduces Balkan dances to America is American - non-American, one sub-division among the non-American would be: 1) non-American with no Balkan origin⁷ and 2) Teachers who have a Balkan ethnic background⁸.

Repertoire

A question in my survey, "Broadly speaking, how many dances do you know?" was subdivided to: Bulgarian Dances, Balkan (non-Bulgarian), Other. From the suggested options most of the dancers marked generally 'more than twenty' as follows: Bulgarian dances - 50 (including choreographed dances); Balkan Dance (non-Bulgarian) – 150; Non-Balkan 50. Some people generalize: 300 Balkan; 500 other; or summarize: 1, 500.

The point of mentioning this data is to outline the fact that experienced folk dancers have a large repertoire and today they have very many choices – which dances to keep, what new dances to learn and remember, and what to forget. Some older folk dancers, however, don't want to learn any new dances.

There are American folk dance specialists who have tried to systematize this huge number of dances introduced to international folk dance groups and have also tried to classify and analyze what kinds of dances they are. Paul Collins, a major figure in folk dancing in Chicago and the Midwest and co-director of Door County Folk Festival, is one of them.

"It is very difficult sometimes to classify things because a lot of the time when I see dance I try to put it in a box—this is this and this is that. And I began to see: well, there is a connection here; a Bulgarian dance is just like a Serbian dance. Where is it originally from? Hard to tell, because sometimes the teachers taught us material they didn't know themselves" (Ivanova-Nyberg 2009b-1).

Paul Collins, now in his 60s, started dancing at age 8 with his mother's group in Chicago. He is one of several very experienced folk dancers who over the years have collected an extremely large repertoire. While commenting on the repertoire, he said:

There are teachers who make up, produce a lot of dances, and it is interesting how many people believe that all these dances they make up are real dances. It is just choreographies; you cannot find these things in a village. And sometimes it upsets me that people don't understand this. But again, for many of them, just learning any of these dances is a great accomplishment. . . The ultimate goal here is for people to have fun. I guess, one of the problems I have sometimes is I want to have fun, I also want to understand if everything we do is authentic. And if it isn't, it doesn't mean it is bad; it just means it is not authentic (Ivanova-Nyberg 2009b-2).

I was discussing this topic with other folk dancers, asking also the question "Has the folk dance repertoire changed since the 1960s?" There are changes which I perceive as enriching. . . But there has also been some degeneration, I feel. There are a lot of synthetic dances – "O, there is a beautiful song so we will make up a dance to it" – sometimes they are nice but they don't have ethnographic value (Ivanova-Nyberg 2009c).

Catherine Rudin, professor in linguistics, is a long-time experienced folk dancer who started dancing at age 12. In answer to my question about new trends she observed in the U.S. Balkan dance scene, she replied:

Yes, there are a lot of Gypsy dances, Rom dances. . . It is partly because it is such energetic music; it is very appealing music, rhythmic, up-beat, up-tempo and the dances are simple for the most part. . . And we start to do a lot of Turkish dances. Ahmed Lüleci's repertoire became very popular. He has a personality and he has wonderful music. He also choreographed his dances and they fit the dances and they do fit the music very nicely (Ivanova-Nyberg 2009b-2).

Analytical review

In the 1960s Balkan line dances—*kolos*— became the most popular dance form. This trend produced terms like *kolomania* and *kolomaniacs*, even *kolo-nisation* of America. The popularity of line dances, as it was mentioned to me, stems not only from the fascination of Balkan music, but also because dancing in a line and holding hands appears to be deeply reflective of the spirit of the time. Dancers discovered in Balkan music and dance something they subconsciously yearned for and could not find in their more and more industrialized society. For many of them learning the first steps of *kolos* began a long journey in exploring the cultures of the Balkans.

Teachers at that time chose different approaches mentioned above in gathering and presenting Balkan material. Some teachers presented dances that they recorded during field research in the Balkans; some presented dances they learned from the ethnic communities in the States; and others introduced choreographies learned from Balkan performing groups. Some started teaching their own choreographies, which were created to feed the hunger for more

Balkan dances and – most important – to be consonant with the American recreational dancers' capacity to learn the pattern and to dance with self-confidence.⁹ Since the first teachers who introduced Balkan dances to the United States were Americans, it appeared later that the ethnic origin of the dance instructor wasn't important to dancers. Of most importance were personal charm of the teacher and the appeal of the material. One of the main changes observed is related to choreographing steps that respond to the musical phrase—a structure which is not typical for Bulgarian and Macedonian dances, where usually there is no overlap between music and dance phrases (or if so, only partially).

In the repertoire of the 1970s one could already find choreographed Balkan¹⁰ and other dances made especially for Americans' 'recreational pleasure'.¹¹ The folk dancers at that time were eager to dance and danced with great enthusiasm. There was high respect for Balkan dances and dance teachers; nobody dared to change a single element. Dancers felt that it was imperative to dance faithfully in the way the dance was taught. At the beginning they weren't able to recognize differences between traditional dance patterns, slightly choreographed, or newly created dances. Arrival of new teachers and enhanced opportunities for traveling to the Balkans, however, opened new perspectives to those who were curious about the origin and nature of these dances. There were some concerns regarding authenticity in folk dance (Shay 1972: 15-16).

In the 1980s and the 1990s the procession of new teachers, both Balkan and non-Balkan, continued. The popularity of folk dancing as a regular activity, however, tended to decline. Existing folk dance programs at colleges were terminated and there was limited opportunity for young people to be introduced to folk dancing.

The Situation Today: So many dances...

"I have forgotten more dances than some folks ever learned" (Ivanova-Nyberg 2009a).

The number of dances and the number of folk dancers who dance weekly at their local group today exists in an inverse proportion; the first rises, the second falls. Most people interviewed expressed the worry that their group has become smaller and smaller and that there are no young people coming to their weekly events. Other groups, however, are gaining new members—newly retired people from the baby boomer generation, who have no experience in folk dancing. This inevitably influences the nature of the repertoire. Group leaders incorporating such new members have started teaching very basic material, striving to keep newcomers' interest.

Some bigger groups continue to host guest instructors. Folk dance leaders and regular folk dancers keep attending workshops and camps. There are however not very many new dances that jump the fence into folk dancers' memories; the memory is already full and these folk dancers are no longer in their teenage years (new material should be something that responds to their taste and age and often has to do with fashionable trends brought by new teachers). What they keep and enjoy is what they have learned first. Many groups still love to dance to tunes they danced to in the 1960s and 1970s; this music speaks to them and does not necessarily send the same message to newcomers, whether college age or retired. Simultaneously, a high percentage of young and middle-aged people and their kids enthusiastically participate in annual Balkan camps by playing music, dancing and singing.

Conclusion

The American Balkan music and dance phenomenon today provides material not only for analyzing the differences and relationships among generations in one culture (see Nahachewsky 2000) but among cultures – American culture and cultures of the Balkans. If we accept the hypothesis that the Balkan fascination in North America was a fashion of the past, then the open question would be: so, now what? A gradual decline of Balkan folk dancing and folk dancing in general or resurrection through world music trends and the power of dance?

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References from the field

- June 29, 2009a. Interview with Leslie Hyll: Dayton, Ohio.
- July 12, 2009b[1]. Interview with Paul Collins, Door County Folk Festival, Wisconsin
- July 12, 2009b[2]. Interview with Catherine Rudin, Door County Folk Festival, Wisconsin
- July 11, 2009c. Interview with Michael Kuharski, Door County Folk Festival, Wisconsin
- September 13, 2009d. Interview with Martin Koenig: Vashon Island, Washington.

Notes

1 Some of the issues discussed here were presented in the Folklore Symposium, organized by Institute of Ethnomusicology, Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 2009.

2 Balkan dancing is a general term used by recreational folk dancers in the United States to identify dances from the current countries of southeastern Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Romania (Southern part), Turkey (European part), Slovenia.

3 Elsie Dunin prior to that developed the topic of the Balkan repertoire in the US (see Dunin 1979).

4 Balkan Camp is an annual week (or long weekend) gathering that welcomes Balkan music and dance lovers from all over the country in rural settings on the East and West coasts of the United States. It includes music and dance teaching sessions (and student performances also), and dance parties with live Balkan music. The intensive workshops conducted there have been and still are enormously influential on folk dancing in the United States (see <<http://www.eefc.org>>).

5 See also <<http://www.phantomranch.net>>.

6 Among those who in the 1960s traveled to the Balkans, willing to be in the villages, to observe the dances in their existed forms and natural environment, and to research and record 'real' dances, are Martin Koenig, Dennis Boxell, Bob Leibman, Steve Kotanski and later Michael Ginsburg, to mention a few. These teachers are often invited to teach at annual camps and to travel in the country as guest instructors.

7 The first name here would be the name of Yves Moreau, French Canadian, who conducted his first field trip to Bulgaria in his youth in the 1960s. Yves Moreau is an extremely influential dance teacher nowadays who brought to the scene traditional Bulgarian dances and choreographies as well; some of the groups keep in their records close to 200 dances introduced by him. To many Balkan folk dance lovers Yves Moreau is their "absolutely all time favorite teacher" (Interviews) In the non-American-no-Balkan-origin category there are several Dutch names (Jaap Leegwater, Bulgarian dances, for example), teachers with Norwegian origin (Lee Otterholt, international repertoire, mostly Balkan), and others.

8 There were three eminent teachers of Macedonian ethnic origin who first came to America in the 1960s: Pece Atanasovski, Georgi ("George") Tomov (both deceased), and Atanas Kolarovski. All three performed with "Tanec" ensemble, and all three established their own approaches in terms of what kind of Macedonian repertoire to introduce to Americans-- mostly traditional or mostly choreographed. Atanas Kolarovski is considered an especially influential dance teacher, a 'living legend'. Essential influences on the Balkan repertoire have teachers like Joe Graciosi (Greek dances), Ahmed Luleci (Turkish dances), Mihai David (Romania), Christian Florescu (Romanian dances) with his partner Sonia Dion, Shani Rifati (Romani Dances), the Bulgarians Peter Iliiev, Nina Kavardzhikova, Iliana Bozhanova, Julian Yordanov, Ventsi Sotirov and others.

9 One example observed is Čamče (Čamčeto), a dance choreographed by Anatol Joukowsky.

10 On the Californian South Slavic repertoire, see Dunin 1979.

11 A well-known phrase used by the popular Hungarian choreographer Andor Czompo that also describes the approach used by many folk dance teachers including those who teach Balkan dance.