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International Folk Dance in Israel and the World – A Short History

Background of the Development of International Folk Dance Sessions in Israel

Balkan Folklore

A few words about the definition, “Balkan”. The Balkans is named for the mountain range that is in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Stara Planina, meaning “Old Mountain”, is the name for the entire mountain range. The peninsula is surrounded by the Adriatic Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea (which includes the Ionian Sea which is connected to the Adriatic Sea to the north). The Sea of Marmara is an inland sea located entirely within the borders of Turkey. It connects the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea. And another thing that is common is, of course, the Danube River that crosses much of the Balkans.

The countries that are fully or partially included in the Balkan Peninsula are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia and a small part of Turkey. We, the lovers of the Balkans, have unofficially added Armenia, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece and Hungary,

Most of the countries are populated by Slavic people, i.e., those who speak the languages that belong to the Balto-Slavic group of languages that are part of the Indo-European language family. Greece and Turkey still have populations with ancient roots. The population of Romania, of Roman origin, is stuck in the middle of the Balkans and, of course, the population of Hungary is completely different in terms of origin and language.

Despite the various differences, a common denominator is still found in Balkan folklore, such as identical handholds, vocalizations, mainly in Romania and Hungary, a variety of costumes in which common symbols can be found, music and dances shared between Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria.

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There are similarities but there are also many differences. Sometimes within one country you can find a large variety of dances from region X that are completely different from region Y. Northern Romania is completely different from that of the south, as is the case with Serbian and Bulgarian dances, as compared to quite similar dances that are danced in different countries, sometimes with the same music and steps.

For example, the Bulgarian "Paidushko Horo" ("limping" dance") with the unusual meter of 5/8 is danced under the same name with different music in Macedonia, Greece, Turkey and even Romania.

How can one define Balkan dances without reference to the gypsies in the Balkans, who are a small minority, but have had a huge impact, especially on the music? (Tzoanim in Hebrew, Gypsies in English and Zigan in most of the Balkans, but they call themselves "Roma".) They are present throughout the Balkans but are mainly concentrated in Romania and Hungary.

Gypsy music is very prominent given the minimal percentage of gypsies in the population (which is less than one percent). The selection of dances, however, is much smaller, except in Romania and Hungary where they have gypsy versions of the regional dances. It should be remembered that, in this regard, in Romania there are about 1.5 million Hungarians who still speak their language and live in separate villages. Therefore, it is not surprising that gypsies also have their own villages, but some of the villages are comprised of Romanian gypsies and some of Hungarian gypsies.



Yehuda Ben Harush – being Greek in Greece

The Dances

The international folk dances are divided as follows:

- A. Balkan dances, most of which are circle dances
- B. "International partner" dances
- C. Circle dances from all over the world (fewer dances)
- D. Israeli folk dances

Dances from the Balkans, the vast majority of which are circle dances, are the main subject in this article. These are folk dances that have been danced for centuries in the Balkans. Balkan folklore is extraordinarily rich (in comparison to Western Europe, for example), in songs, dances, costumes and in musical instruments.

For example, in Greece. Most of you are familiar with the "Hasapiko" [meaning the Butcher's

Dance] [see "Vari Hasapiko" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XgQsT9RUUU>] and "Hasaposerviko" from the Greek film, "Zorba" [1964], and this is the worldview of most of us regarding Greek folklore. However, it is only a small fraction of Greek folklore. I assume that most of the dances will be less attractive compared to "Hasapiko". In my opinion, even the original music will be difficult for many to recognize and like.

Basically, in the Balkans the dances are divided into regions, sub-regions and villages. In a certain region (particular in a province) you can identify the dances by style, musical instruments and more. As "Balkanists", we do not indicate the name of a country when we

In each region, each village still has its own dances or local variations for the region's dances. Today, because of the large number of instructors in the world who make their living partly from dance workshops, many choreographies have been created but, at the end of the day, few survive.



Dunav Group in folk costumes

present a dance, but first the area/region, i.e., Balkan, a dance from "Shop" (Bulgaria), dance from "Epirus" (Greece), or a dance from Maramureş (Romania). In each region, each village still has its own dances or local variations for the region's dances. Today, because of the large number of instructors in the world who make their living partly from dance workshops, many choreographies have been created but, at the end of the day, few survive.

Balkan dances have a lead dancer at the beginning of the line, and it is usually he who determines when to change steps. He is, in short, the leader. In Greece, even the last dancer in the line has a role, and at celebrations in the villages, it is customary for the last dancer to "buy" the leader role by "tipping" the orchestra.

In Israel, our dance chugim (sessions) have a very rich repertoire (e.g., "Dunav" has a repertoire of close to 1,000 dances) and over time we dance most of them; these folklore dances do not die. "Dunav" is an Israeli nonprofit organization that works to promote Balkan folklore. We dance once a week, hold annual seminars, weekends, and document Balkan folklore through an extensive website that includes dance photographs, costumes, song lyrics, our performance videos, maps from the Balkans and more (the author is the chairman of the association).

It is important to mention that Balkan dances are danced only with hands held (i.e., "V", "W", on the shoulders, front or back basket, etc.). The only time we have danced without any handhold has been during the Coronavirus pandemic, after the first quarantine. There is great meaning to dancing together, not just the handholds but also the shape of the circle, open or closed, short lines and more.

It's most important to emphasize: Do not shorten dances (!!!), even if the steps are simple, keep dancing until the end. A good example of this is the most famous gypsy dance in the Balkans, "Čoček" [pronounced "cho'-chek"], (as opposed to "Čačak" from Serbia), which may last 3-8 minutes according to the various [musical] arrangements. Of course, at festive events we come with colorful costumes that makes the atmosphere, which is also special, an impressive experience.

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There are also partner dances in the Balkans but they are really few; a bit in Transylvania, [a region in central] Romania. On the other hand, Hungarian dances (N.B. Hungary is not actually included in the Balkans) are predominantly partner dances. In fact, if we take out a small Hungarian community in Transylvania in Romania called "Csángós", where a lot of circle dances are danced, we would only have one Hungarian circle dance left that is danced only by women ("Karikázó").

Is this great folklore still alive? Well, unfortunately no longer in most Balkan countries; remnants can be found in Romania. In Greece there are traditional celebrations in villages (that are organized by nonprofit associations and not something that is voluntarily done).

The big surprise is Hungary, where there are dance sessions almost every evening and most of the participants are very young, but this is not recommended for Israeli folk dance enthusiasts, because all evening they dance only one dance. (The classes represent regions in Hungary, so each session only dances the dance of its region).

It is very fascinating for me, but everything is in the eye of the beholder. In Israel, we Balkanists are proud of the fact that we are the ones who preserve and document Balkan folklore and that is also reflected in our name (i.e., "Dunav" – the association for the promotion of Balkan folklore in Israel).

The "International partner dances" that we dance in Israel are indeed dances from all over the world, but if we look closely, we notice that they are mainly those dances from the British Isles, Scandinavia, Germany, Poland, Russia, Mexico and the USA (with the most dances). Naturally, all the dances from the USA are new choreographies, but those from Europe and Mexico are mostly authentic. The collection of partner dances in Israel is much smaller than that of the circle dances from the Balkans; there are only about 250 dances, and we also dance them regularly.

In "Noa-Am", as well as in "Dunav", we chose to document and managed to film all the dances and they can be found on YouTube.



Serbian dance – the costumes



Dunav – Dance weekend in Ginosar, 2010

The World

What seems so natural today – to dance different Balkan dances in the same session (i.e., from Serbia, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Albania, Hungary and, of course, the Romani, colloquially known as Roma, aka gypsy dances), is quite a surprising fact

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since folk dances from the Balkans were only danced by immigrants from the same country and only those dances of the country from which they came.

In general, some sessions dance both dances from the Balkans and partner dances from the rest of the world (under the title of International) and in some, only dances from the Balkans. Additionally, there are still many sessions in which only dances from one source are danced.

Very little research or work has been done on this subject but basically there is evidence for the existence of sessions in which dances were danced from all over the Balkans during the 20th century from the early 1930s to the 1950s, but the really big boom started in the early the early 1960s.

What caused it? There is no clear answer but at least it is clear who the participants were. These people were Caucasian from an upper social class and most of them were women and quite a few Jews. They mostly conveyed an openness to folklore in its various forms.

At the beginning of the journey (in the first half of the twentieth century) there were several instructors who led this new movement most of whom were not of Balkan descent. They introduced dances as originally taught to them, or from the immigrant communities in their country. Some really made an effort and traveled to the Balkans to bring back dances straight from the source.

One of the first instructors, **Yves Moreau** of Canada, argued that most of the phenomenon stemmed from Jewish immigrants' desire to return to their roots in Eastern European and Balkan folklore, which explains the high number of Jews in Balkan dance sessions in the United States. This explanation encountered difficulty since, for the most part, Jewish immigrants were mostly from urban areas and therefore less exposed to authentic folklore.

From the United States, sessions have evolved in Europe and a few other places in the world like in the Far East but the expansion has been quite limited. Balkan sessions cannot be found in most counties in Asian, African and South American countries.

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Over the years the appetite increased, and a significant number of instructors began to choreograph dances to original music and this caused a long-lasting debate about whether to just preserve folklore (which also includes music) or create new choreographies - yes or no.

There are thousands of original folk dances in every country in the Balkans and yet some of the instructors preferred to create choreographies (some of which are really great), so the need for innovation was not due to a shortage but to the preferences of the instructors. Some even came from the Balkans to the United States only with new choreographies even though they had a rich repertoire from their country of origin.

Over time, remaining organizations began to hold dance evenings with local musicians who fell in love with Balkan music and began to map (trace) the dances and try to locate an historical source. They created a tradition of weekend dance camps and, not settling

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for local instructors, began inviting instructors from the Balkans - straight from the source. Over time, of course, organized trips to dance seminars in the Balkans began, which continue to this day.

These days, this charming phenomenon is disappearing; dance sessions are shrinking and the community is getting older. The future looks bleak.

I have written mostly about dances from the Balkans, but I have already mentioned that there is also a lot of room for partner dances mainly from Europe, but not exclusively. There are also folk dances that, over time, have had their choreographies altered. However, there are still quite a few dances from original sources that have never lost their flavor.

In a nutshell, that's it. But before we turn to Israel, it's important to know that this phenomenon migrated to us [in Israel] from the USA.

In Israel

We have several international folk dance sessions in Israel, but they mostly do Balkan dances:

For over 30 years, the longstanding chug in Haifa, "Balkanitsa" the Haifa Balkan Dance Group, has been run by the "Balkanitsa" Association. [Balkanitsa Haifa Balkan Dance Group]. A chug in Jerusalem, that will soon celebrate 50 years, is conducted by the Dunav Association. A mixed session of Balkan and partner dances, that meets once a month on Fridays (for almost 60 years!!), is run by the "Noa-Am" organization.

There are also several other international folk dance sessions for older adults in Jerusalem, conducted by **Motti Kotzer**, as well as classes for Greek dance only in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Noa-Am was established in Israel in 1959 and exists to this day. The association aims to dance folk dances from all over the world, which can be limited to Balkan and partner dances. The association, founded by **Miriam Flex** and a few other members, continues to exist thanks to **Miriam Lerner** who very quickly began to lead the association, (for many years together with Aryeh Wax z"l who also demonstrated dances and was a management partner), which she still manages as of this day. The association was established as a closed members club that has been open to everyone for the past twenty years.

Also in Haifa, before the current chug was founded, there was a session with a similar framework to "Noa-Am", established and led by the late Nahum Shachar z"l. Nahum was among the first to bring International partner dances from the United States to Israel. A significant part of the large repertoire that remains today, exists thanks to him.

As you can see, the main classes are run through associations and nonprofits; all the dance leaders do so voluntarily.

Unfortunately, even among international folk dancers, we are experiencing a decline in the number of dancers and an increase in age, however, during the last twenty years a great



Friends of Dunav from Hong Kong



Dunav – An evening of Serbian dances, Ginosar, 2004

resurgence has begun. The Dunav Association began a documentary campaign that still continues to this day. As part of it, about 300 dances were filmed and uploaded to YouTube and the association's website. Instructors from the countries of origin [of the dances] were invited to conduct workshops in Israel. We started organizing "weekends" with guests from abroad and a local band of musicians, produced CDs, books with the song lyrics, established an extensive website and more.

The "Balkanista" organization is also a partner in this journey of revival and they organize national Shabbat meetings, large events and invite instructors from abroad.

The Dancers

Despite all of the above, in the end, the vast majority of Balkan dance dancers are not of Balkan descent. However, one thing is clear. We are getting older and our numbers are dwindling. The younger generations naturally have an abundance of cultural content that was not present in our time.

How then do you get to dance Balkan folklore? In the United States, you can join through the universities where there were, and still are, Balkan dance sessions. In Israel, it is a wonderful initiative by those devotees who brought it, not from the Balkans, but from the United States directly to Israel.

Connecting to the Balkans is, in my humble opinion, through the music that leads to the dances, but I cannot not vouch for every ear. Greek music is very popular in Israel (not ethnic) and, in my opinion, also Romanian and Hungarian to some extent, but still, not everyone who comes to our sessions will remain. Those who remain are characterized by openness, tolerance and, of course, healthy curiosity.

In the United States, most Balkan dancers are loyal to authentic folklore. In Israel, naturally, most dancers have been exposed to Israeli folk dances, with which it is easier for them to integrate into and it is difficult for them to adopt the Balkan dance style.

About the author, Yehuda Ben Harush

It has been 20 years since I founded the Dunav Association with friends. There have been many dozens of trips to the Balkans, especially to remote villages, as well as to seminars, weekends, song workshops and more. For years, I have been cultivating a database containing tens of thousands of songs, music, dances, lyrics to songs, authentic maps of the countries and, of course, a photographic collection of costumes (and also actual costumes).

I have set up an extensive and comprehensive website based on some of the collection I have amassed. In recent years, my focus has been on Hungary, including learning the language.



Yehuda Ben Harush – as Romanian



Yehuda Ben Harush – as Serbian

I've also researched a challenging German dance in partners called "Zwiefacher" and filmed 50 different versions of it.

Useful information

Dunav's website: <https://dunav.org.il/>

Dunav's YouTube page (350 dances): <https://www.youtube.com/user/dunavfolk>

YouTube page of the German dance "Zweifacher": <https://www.youtube.com/user/Zeifacher>

Noa-Am's YouTube page (250 couples' dances): <https://www.youtube.com/user/Noamfolkdance>

Balkanitsa website: <http://balkanitsa.org.il/>

Chugim (Sessions) in Israel

"Dunav" – every Thursday from 8:00 to 10:30 pm, in the Reform Synagogue "Kol Haneshama", 1 Asher St., German Colony, Jerusalem.

"Balkanitsa" – every Tuesday from 9:00 to 11:00 pm, the Sports Hall at the Technion, Haifa.

"Noa-Am" – on the first Friday of each month (monthly class) from 4:00 to 7:00 pm, circles and couples. Kiryat Sharet Community Center, Ammunition Hill 27, Holon.

Greek only session – on Tuesdays from 7:30 to 9:00 pm. Kol Haneshama Reform Synagogue, 1 Asher St., German Colony, Jerusalem.

Motti Kotzer instructs in the morning at several folk dance classes for adults. Details can be found on the "Rokdim" website. 

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