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Preserving the dance: Srбуhi Lisitsian's system of movement notation and the conservation of Armenian national dances

Zachować taniec – system notacji ruchu Srбуhi Lisitsian i podtrzymywanie tradycji ormiańskich tańców narodowych

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Abstract

Srбуhi Lisitsian (1893–1979) was a distinguished Armenian dance scholar, ethnographer, and movement notation expert whose work played a crucial role in preserving Armenia's intangible cultural heritage. Through decades of meticulous research, she systematically documented and analysed almost 2,000 traditional Armenian dances, thereby ensuring their survival for future generations. Her groundbreaking monograph, *Zapis' dvizhieniiia (kinetografiia)* [*Movement Notation (Kinetography)*], introduced an innovative system for recording movement, distinguished by its simplicity, efficiency, and ability to capture not only physical gestures but also muscular tension and facial expressions. Despite its significance, her system remained largely unrecognized in Western scholarship.

Beyond notation, Lisitsian's seminal work, *Starinnye plyaski i teatralne predstavny armianskogo naroda* [*Ancient Dances and Theatrical Performances of the Armenian People*], systematically categorized Armenian dances based on their structure, symbolism, and ritualistic meanings. By connecting dance with folklore, mythological traditions, and historical records, she provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolution of Armenian national dances.

Lisitsian's legacy extends into the digital era, influencing contemporary efforts to safeguard traditional dances. The digitization of her kinetography system facilitates the accurate recording and transmission of Armenian dances through modern technology. Her work underscores the necessity of preserving intangible cultural heritage in the face of globalization, thereby highlighting the pivotal role of women in the safeguarding of national traditions. By meticulously documenting and analysing Armenian dance traditions, Lisitsian laid the foundation for their study, revival, and continued appreciation as a living cultural expression.

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Keywords

Srbuhi Lisitsian, movement notation, Armenian dance heritage, intangible cultural heritage, ethnochoreology, dance preservation

Abstrakt

Srbuhi Lisitsian (1893–1979) była wybitną armeńską badaczką tańca, etnografką oraz specjalistką w dziedzinie zapisu ruchu, której praca odegrała kluczową rolę w zachowaniu niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego Armenii. Przez dekady skrupulatnych badań systematycznie dokumentowała i analizowała niemal 2000 tradycyjnych tańców ormiańskich, dzięki czemu zapewniła ich przetrwanie dla przyszłych pokoleń. Jej przełomowa monografia *Zapis' dvizhienii (kinetografiia)* [Zapis ruchu (kinetografia)] wprowadziła nowatorski system zapisu ruchu, wyróżniający się prostotą, efektywnością oraz zdolnością uchwycenia nie tylko gestów fizycznych, lecz także napięcia mięśniowego i wyrazu twarzy. Mimo swojego znaczenia system zapisu Lisitsian pozostał w dużej mierze nieznany zachodniej nauce.

W innym swoim przełomowym dziele, zatytułowanym *Starinnye plyaski i teatralnye predstavy armyanskogo naroda* [Starożytnie tańce i przedstawienia teatralne ludu ormiańskiego], Lisitsian systematycznie pogrupowała ormiańskie tańce na podstawie ich struktury, symboliki oraz znaczenia rytualnego. Łącząc taniec z folklorem, tradycjami mitologicznymi i zapisami historycznymi, badaczka stworzyła ramy pozwalające kompleksowo zrozumieć ewolucję narodowych tańców ormiańskich.

Dziedzictwo Lisitsian sięga również ery cyfrowej i wpływa na współczesne inicjatywy na rzecz zachowania tańców tradycyjnych. Digitalizacja jej systemu zapisu kinetograficznego umożliwia precyzyjne rejestrowanie i propagowanie ormiańskich tańców za pomocą nowoczesnych technologii. Praca Lisitsian wskazuje na konieczność ochrony niematerialnego dziedzictwa kulturowego w obliczu globalizacji, a jednocześnie uwydatnia kluczową rolę kobiet w zachowywaniu tradycji narodowych. Dzięki skrupulatnemu dokumentowaniu i analizowaniu ormiańskich tradycji tanecznych Lisitsian położyła podwaliny pod ich badanie, odrodzenie i dalsze pielęgnowanie jako żywej formy ekspresji kulturowej.

Słowa kluczowe

Srbuhi Lisitsian, zapis ruchu, ormiańskie dziedzictwo taneczne, niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe, etnochoreologia, ochrona tańca

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF SRBUHI LISITSIAN, AN ARMENIAN SCHOLAR and conservator whose pioneering work in the development of movement notation has played a crucial role in preserving the intangible cultural heritage of Armenia. By means of her system, Lisitsian not only documented Armenian traditional dances, but also ensured their survival for future generations, making a lasting impact on the field of heritage preservation. Her work is of critical importance in preserving the cultural essence of these performances, ensuring their continued study, practice, and transmission to future generations. Lisitsian's contributions are of particular significance because they provide a vital framework for the conservation of dance, an aspect of cultural heritage that is often overlooked.

The years following the establishment of the Republic of Armenia in 1918 were crucial and significant for both the development of Armenian culture and the study and preservation of cultural heritage. In this regard, female art historians and cultural scholars such as Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Tatyana Izmailova, and Lidia Durnovo played a particularly important role in documenting, analysing, and preserving Armenian artistic and cultural traditions. Srbuhi Lisitsian also made an invaluable contribution to the study and development of Armenian national dance.

Srbuhi Lisitsian was born in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1893 into the family of the renowned Armenian educator, ethnographer, and political figure Stepan Lisitsian. Her mother, Yekaterina Kristaporovna Lisitsian, was also a teacher and the founder of a gymnasium (secondary school). In the absence of an independent Armenian state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tiflis, the

1 Srбуhi Lisitsian



capital of Georgia, played a pivotal role in the development of Armenian culture. The city has been home to numerous prominent Armenian writers and painters. Srбуhi's parents published the children's magazine *Hasker* (1905–1922), edited the weekly *Taraz* (1892–1893), and collaborated with prominent Armenian cultural figures, including writers Hovhannes Tumanyan, Avetik Isahakyan, Alexander Shirvanzade, Ghazaros Aghayan, as well as artists Gevorg Bashinjaghyan, Panos Terlemezyan, Yeghishe Tadevosyan and many others. Srбуhi Lisitsian began her studies at her mother's gymnasium. Additionally, she received private tuition at home, focusing particularly on German, and by the age of 15, she was already working on translations.

The years 1911–1917 were Srбуhi's period of study in Moscow, Russia. She pursued her higher education in Russian and Romance literature in Moscow, graduating from the Higher Courses for Women (Guerrier Courses). In the early twentieth century, Russia experienced an unprecedented flourishing of the arts and literature. Artistic movements and ideas from the West, including Symbolism and Futurism, found fertile ground and were further developed within the local artistic community. These changes influenced various branches of art. 'For a dozen years, from 1913 until the mid 1920s, Russia, from being a country of classical ballet, became a country of burgeoning new dance.'¹ This environment, in conjunction with early exposure to artists at her parents' home, contributed to the broadening of Srбуhi's intellectual and artistic interests. Alongside her higher education, she attended the studios of Ozarevskaya and Chernitskaya. It is likely that her future interests were influenced by her studies with such prominent women. Olga Ozarevskaya was not only a performer but also a collector of folklore, while Inna Chernitskaya was a talented dancer and innovative choreographer.

¹ I. Sirotkina, 'The Revolutionary Body, or Was There Modern Dance in Russia?', *Art dello Spettacolo / Performing Arts*, 2018, N. 4, p. 31.

Upon returning to Tiflis in 1917, Srбуhi Lisitsian actively engaged in cultural activities. In that same year, she founded a studio for recitation, rhythm, and plastic movement, which in 1924 evolved into the Tiflis Institute of Rhythm. Lisitsian's years in Tiflis were marked by both organizational work and intense creative activity.² 'In the autumn, the People's Commissariat of Education of Georgia sent Lisitsian, along with her husband and two dancers, to Germany. She remained there for three years, teaching at the school of the Soviet embassy and at the studio of the German communist group 'Rote Blusen' (the equivalent of the 'Blue Blouses').'³

In 1930, Srбуhi Lisitsian settled in Armenia. At that time, many cultural and political figures who had received education and professional experience abroad were relocating to Armenia. The foundations of higher education and key cultural institutions were being laid, including the establishment of Yerevan State University (it is notable that from the very beginning, both men and women had access to education at Armenian universities). Furthermore, the National Gallery of Armenia and the First State Theatre of Armenia (now the Gabriel Sundukyan National Academic Theatre) were founded.

Upon moving to Armenia, Srбуhi Lisitsian embarked on a wide-ranging professional journey, which can be divided into two main areas: practical work and academic research. In 1930, through her efforts, a technical school for rhythm, plastic movement, and physical culture was established in Yerevan, later evolving into the Studio for rhythm and plastic movement. Lisitsian led the studio and its ethnographic dance ensemble. In 1936, she played a key role in founding the Choreographic College, becoming its first director.

While her contributions to dance education were groundbreaking, Lisitsian's scholarly work established the foundation for the systematic study and preservation of Armenian national dances. This article focuses on Srбуhi Lisitsian's academic research, highlighting her major scientific contributions to the preservation and transmission of Armenian national dances. The objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive overview of Lisitsian's work, not only in the study of Armenian dance but also in her contributions to the development of global ethnochoreology.

The key research objectives include:

- a) developing a movement notation system;
- b) collecting and documenting Armenian ethnic dances, and
- c) approaches to the study of ancient Armenian dances.

The research uses analytical methods. The research methods employed in this paper include an extensive review of Srбуhi Lisitsian's works, archival research, and a comparative analysis of her contributions to other systems of movement notation. This methodology allows for the identification of her unique approach to the preservation of Armenian intangible heritage through dance. This research provides new insights into her pivotal role in heritage conservation.

Invention of the Movement Notation System

After settling in Armenia, Srбуhi Lisitsian devoted time both to her professional career and the collection of Armenian national dances. While visiting the regions of Armenia, Lisitsian undertook to document the ethnic dances directly from their practitioners, thus giving rise to the question of how to record the dances accurately. She began to take this problem seriously. As a result, in 1940, the book *Movement Notation (Kinetography)*⁴ was published. This is a significant work in which

² N. Sargsyan, 'Deiatel'nost' Srбуhi Stepanovny Lisitsian v 10–20-e gody XX veka', *Journal of Art Studies*, 2021, pp. 94–115.

³ I. Sirotkina, *Svobodnoe dvizhenie i plasticheskie tanets v Rossii*, Nauchnaya biblioteka series, Moscow 2011, p. 58, available at: tinyurl.com/r5n4pdkb (accessed 3 February 2025). (The 'Rote Blusen' movement was part of a broader leftist artistic initiative that blended political ideology with experimental performance.)

⁴ S. Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizheniia (kinetografiia)*, Moscow–Leningrad 1940.

the author demonstrates both meticulous research into the history of dance notation systems and modern trends, and absolute innovation in the creation of a new model of movement notation. While Lisitsian's notation system may not be widely adopted in contemporary choreographic practice, it remains a valuable contribution to dance historiography and cultural preservation. Her pioneering efforts predate and parallel those of more globally recognized systems,⁵ offering a unique ethnographic perspective. Today, her work provides scholars with an alternative lens through which to examine the movement vocabularies of traditional Armenian dances and their transformation across time.

With regard to the creation of the movement notation system, Srбуhi Lisitsian writes: 'I was able to develop not a narrow, limited dance script, but a system for recording any human movement. I base this on the idea that it is impossible to create a scientifically grounded script for dance alone, just as it is impossible to have a script only for prose, only for poetry, or only for personal or official correspondence. A system must be created to record any movement of a person – whether in life, work, or art; in other words, a universal kinetic (movement) script.'⁶

The book, which consists of 426 pages, is divided into two parts. The first part presents the history of dance notation, starting from the fifteenth century (*Basses danses* by Margaret of Austria) to the twentieth century. Lisitsian discusses Antonius Arena's *Ad suos compagnones...* (1531), which presents 60 basse dances with instructions on how to learn and perform them, Fabritio Caroso's *Il Ballarino*, and Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchésographie*. At the beginning, there is a separate reference to Raoul-Auger Feuillet's *Chorégraphie* work (Beauchamp is addressed separately with a subtitle, without using the term Beauchamp-Feuillet notation).

Lisitsian then examines Pierre Rameau's *Abrégé*,⁷ Claude-Marc Magny's *Principes de Chorégraphie*, Favier's notation system, and Charles-Jacob Guillemin's *Chorégraphie*. Among the theorists of the nineteenth century, Lisitsian highlights Carlo Blasis, Arthur Saint-Léon, Friedrich Albert Zorn, Vladimir Ivanovich Stepanov, and François Delsarte.

In the twentieth century, Lisitsian refers to Olga Desmond's *Rhythmographik*, Konstantin Sotonin's *The System of Notation for Human Body Movements*, and Antonine Meunier's *La danse classique* as key works on dance notation. Srбуhi Lisitsian also mentions the attempts of the German Io Fischer in dance notation, with whom she was familiar through personal conversations. She also provides a brief reference to Rudolph von Laban, whose movement notation system later became widely known as Labanotation. It is worth noting that Laban's system attracted the attention of specialists primarily after 1940, especially following the establishment of The Dance Notation Bureau in New York in 1940, the publication of Laban's eight-volume *Das Handbuch der Kinetographie Laban* (The Handbook of Kinetography Laban) between 1946–1950, and its subsequent English translation, followed by the publication of Ann Hutchinson's *Labanotation: The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement* in 1954 and Laban's *Principles of Dance and Movement Notation* in 1956.

The second section of Lisitsian's book, *Movement Notation*, comprises 12 chapters and an appendix. The term 'kinetography', as used by Lisitsian, refers to a graphic method for capturing bodily motion in dance, based on objective movement analysis. While it shares etymological roots with Laban's system, Lisitsian developed her approach independently, with distinct principles and symbols. In the first chapter, the author introduces the terminology and basic principles of movement notation:

⁵ Among the most widely known and used movement notation systems are Labanotation (Rudolf Laban, 1920s), Benesh Movement Notation (Rudolf and Joan Benesh, 1950s), and Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation (Noa Eshkol and Abraham Wachman, 1950s). These systems have been employed internationally for recording, teaching, and analysing dance and other forms of human movement.

⁶ S. Lisitsian, *Starinnye plyaski i teatralne predstavny armianskogo naroda*, vol. 1, Yerevan 1958, p. 3.

⁷ P. Rameau, G.L. Pécourt, *Abrégé de la nouvelle méthode dans l'art d'écrire ou de tracer toutes sortes de danses de ville*, Paris 1971.

TABLE OF KINETOGRAPHY SIGNS		
Signs of body parts		
1		1. Feet.
2		2. Placed toes (tiptoes).
3		3. Placed heels.
4		4. Rolling on toes.
5		5. Rolling on heels.
6		6. Edges of the feet in the record on the horizontal plane. The entire foot in the record on the vertical plane.
7		7. Feet flat (on the rise).
8		8. Knees.
9		9. Elbows.
10		10. Shoulders.
11		11. Pelvis.
12		12. Hands. Neck. (Frontal line. Sign of straightened knees.)
13		13. Hand with fingers bent almost to the position of a fist.
14		14. Combination of thumb with other fingers.
15		15. Fists.
16		16. Clasping hands by the little fingers.
17		17. Clasping hands palm to palm with crossed hands and interlocked fingers.
18		18. Small line: fingers of hands and feet; sign of crossed feet; palms forward; girl and boy direction outward; absence of muscular tension — passivo.
19		19. Head.

2 Table of Kinetography Signs. Source: Srбуhi Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizhieniiia (kinetografiiia)*, Moscow-Leningrad 1940

3 Znaki kinetograficzne. Źródło: Srбуhi Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizhieniiia (kinetografiiia)*, Moscow-Leningrad 1940

“The recording of a “bodily chord” is called a kinetic beat (shortened to kinetic takt). The recording of a complete movement sequence of chords is a kinetophase. The term kinetogram is used to describe the recording of a complete kinetic phenomenon (for example: physical exercises, labour processes, dance, hand speech, etc.). A kinetogram is the score of the body’s positions.”⁸

To make movement notation both precise and as simple as possible, Lisitsian proposes that the entire kinetic takt be divided into four parts:

1. the footprint of the foot on the horizontal plane;
2. the combination of body positions below the waist on the vertical plane (from the point of the hip to the foot);
3. the combination of body positions above the waist on the vertical plane;
4. facial mimetic movements, when necessary.

⁸ S. Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizhieniiia (kinetografiiia)*, p. 95.

20		20. All joint radii: shoulder, elbow, hip, shin bones. Torso from neck to waist and from waist to the point of the groin. Both shoulders. Upper and lower eyelids. Upper and lower lips. Nose from forehead to the middle and from the middle to the nostrils. Sign of glissando.
21		21. Tongue. Sign of bending and straightening knees.
22		22. Teeth. Trill. Small bends of the knees.
Signs for Recording Mise-en-Scène and Movement Nuances.		
23		23. Woman. Man.
24		24. Direction sign.
25		25. Direction arrow.
26		26. Dot – sign of touch. Placed in a directional circle — sign of "inside."
27		27. Sign of crossing.
28		28. Activo — presence of muscular tension.
29		29. Sign of full turn.
30		30. Ligature. Sign of immobility of a body part.
31		31. Apostrophes. Sign of detachment of a body part from the ground or from each other.
32		32. Accents for left and right body parts.
33		33. } 34. } Signs of movement repetition.
34		

Above these four parts, (an) additional line(s) is/are added to record the rhythm of the movement.⁹

The complete graphical notation of any dance material consists of the following parts:

1. the notation of body part movements on the plane;
2. the notation of body positions and movements in space above the plane;
3. the notation of mimetic movements;
4. the notation of movement rhythm;
5. the notation of the melody (vocal or instrumental);
6. the notation of participants' organization and reorganization (mise-en-scène).¹⁰

To fully record the kinetic takt, square-grid paper is used, with each part of the takt being recorded one below the other, separated by horizontal divisions. The separate takt is then divided from the next by vertical divisions.

The second chapter is dedicated to the analysis of movement: 'When analysing the direction of movement of each body part, the following key points should be carefully considered:

⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁰ S. Lisitsian, *Starinnye plyaski i teatralne predstavny armianskogo Naroda*, p. 4.

ARMENIAN DANCE "VER-VERI" ("UP-UP")

The image displays the notation for the Armenian dance "Ver-Veri". It includes a musical score in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation is divided into three main sections: Part 1, Part 2, and Version 2. Each section includes a musical staff with notes and rests, and a corresponding diagram of the dancer's movement. The diagrams use a grid system to show the position of the body parts (head, torso, arms, legs) and the direction of movement. Part 1 shows a sequence of movements with angles like 45, 90, 135, and 375. Part 2 and Version 2 show similar sequences with different angles and movements. A diagram at the top left shows the formation of participants in a circle, and another shows the hand clasp position.

4 Notation of Armenian Dance 'Ver-Veri'. Source: Srбуhi Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizheniia (kinetografia)*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1940

Zapis tańca ormiańskiego Hop, hop. Źródło: Srбуhi Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizheniia (kinetografia)*, Moscow-Leningrad 1940

1. the position of each body part in relation to its joint, like the radius to its centre, i.e., the relationship between the joint radius and the joint centre;
2. the presence of additional movement in this joint;
3. the direction of the joint radius, determined by the direction circles, the relationship of these directions with the joint centre, and the determination of the body part's position in space;
4. the position of the body part in space, determined by the volumetric position of the farthest point of the joint radius and its centre;
5. the angle between adjacent joint radii.

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Armenian Dance 'Silvani-Yarkhushta', Yerevan Choreographic School, staged by Srбуhi Lisitsian. Photo from the archive of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA

Taniec ormiański *Silvani-Yarkhushta* w inscenizacji Srбуhi Lisitsian, Erywańska Szkoła Choreograficzna. Fot. z archiwum Instytutu Archeologii i Etnografii NAS RA



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6. the line or area of movement described by the farthest point of the radius or the entire radius.¹¹

The subsequent chapters of the book present the forms of notation for the traces of the lower and upper body parts in the horizontal and vertical planes. The system allows for the notation of the positions of the foot, heel, pelvis, knee, elbow, shoulder, head, neck, wrist, and fingers, types of touches, and mutual positions of the upper body parts. In the horizontal plane, it accounts for the length of steps, step tilt, and crossing.

The appendix of the book presents several dance elements notated using the system, including *Battement développé*, *Port de bras*, *Grand port de bras*, elements from Ukrainian and Georgian dances, the Armenian *Ver-very* dance, the Kurdish *Khirtan* dance, a scene from Asafyev's *Bakhchisaray Fountain* ballet, a section from Glinka's opera *Ivan Susanin*, as well as elements of 'hand speech' and a physical education performance.

The *Movement Notation* book is an extensive work and seems to have marked significant progress for the author. However, shortly after its publication, Srбуhi Lisitsian's son was arrested and executed for anti-Stalinist activities. Lisitsian herself was forced into obscurity, and her next major academic work was only published after Stalin's death.

Preservation of Armenian National Dances

In 1958, the first volume of the monograph *Ancient Dances and Theatrical Performances of the Armenian People* was published. This extensive work is the first fundamental academic study dedicated to Armenian national dances. The research is based on the collection and recording of 650 Armenian dances, 50 Kurdish dances, and several others (throughout her life, Srбуhi Lisitsian recorded nearly 2,000 dances), gathered during field studies in various regions of Armenia. By studying these, she set herself the task of analysing and scientifically illuminating the content and form of dance and theatrical movement.

¹¹ S. Lisitsian, *Zapis' dvizheniia (kinetografiia)*, p. 4.



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Armenian Dance 'Let's Chop the Onion and Garlic,' Yerevan Choreographic School, staged by Srбуhi Lisitsian. Photo from the archive of Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA

Taniec ormiański *Dawaj, posiekajmy cebulę i czosnek* w inscenizacji Srбуhi Lisitsian, Erywańska Szkoła Choreograficzna. Fot. z archiwum Instytutu Archeologii i Etnografii NAS RA

The first section of the book is entitled *Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Dances and Theatrical Performances of the Armenian People*. In her study, description, and analysis of the dances, Srбуhi Lisitsian relies on four main components: the movement score-text, the musical text, the verbal text, and the pictorial text. Thus, the movement text consists of all the movements of the performers, the distribution of roles among them, and the mise-en-scènes.¹² The musical text includes vocal, instrumental, and rhythm-sound accompaniment.¹³ The verbal text is made up of the chorus and, on occasion, dialogical text.¹⁴ The pictorial text consists of:

- a) the stage setup (whether a closed space or an open-air setting) and its decoration;
- b) the attributes held by the dancers;
- c) the costumes, headpieces, hairstyles, shoes, and accessories;
- d) the makeup;
- e) masks.¹⁵

Srбуhi Lisitsian conducts a detailed study of Armenian ancient dances from several perspectives. She presents the origin of the dances, the associated rituals, and the feasts during which they were performed. She uncovers the external structure of the dances by describing their rhythm, types of movements, and measures, with particular attention to the important foot movements in Armenian dances. She also describes the mise-en-scènes and delves into the content, discussing dances that symbolize success (dances moving to the right) or failure (dances moving to the left), as well as the role of the leader. She separately highlights and describes Armenian musical instruments.

¹² S. Lisitsian, *Starinnye plyaski i teatralnye predstavy armyanskogo Naroda*, p. 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 29–30.

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Armenian Dance 'Yarkhushta', Yerevan Choreographic School, staged by Srбуhi Lisitsian. Photo from the archive of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of NAS RA

Taniec ormiański *Yarkhushta* w inscenizacji Srбуhi Lisitsian, Erywańska Szkoła Choreograficzna. Fot. z archiwum Instytutu Archeologii i Etnografii NAS RA



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The dances are categorized according to their dance figures, which include: one step forward-one step back, only right, two steps forward-one step back, two steps forward-two steps back, and their variations. In each case, Lisitsian examines the semantic, symbolic, and ritualistic layers of the dances. For instance, when discussing the snake-like movements in dances, she talks about the dual meaning of serpents in Armenian beliefs.¹⁶ She reveals the symbolic meaning of the closed circle used in many of the ancient Armenian dances: 'Witches, shamans, priests, and priestesses believed that by drawing a circle or standing in it, as well as by placing certain objects within the circle, they could impose a taboo on the entry of evil spirits or enemies into the circle. The formation of a circle was considered to offer protection against evil forces and to "guarantee" the successful outcome of a ritual. The act of drawing a circle and standing within one was also a mimicry of the astral cult. It imitated the shape and cycle of the day and night celestial bodies – the sun and the moon.'¹⁷

The book's appendix includes the verbal text of the dance (where applicable), along with its Armenian translation if the text is in another language.

The second volume of the book, published in 1972,¹⁸ presents, under a separate subheading, the Armenian people's conceptions of evil and benevolent spirits, as well as magical (ritual) dances. The significance of this section lies in the fact that Srбуhi Lisitsian combines the information we have inherited from Armenian medieval historiography with the traditions and customs preserved in the villages until the twentieth century. The researcher specifically refers to the legends passed down from Moses of Khoren, the 'father of Armenian historiography' (a fifth-century historian who was the first to present the complete history of Armenia,¹⁹ from its origins to his contemporary times, drawing from not only Armenian but also Greek and other sources).

A particular point of interest in Lisitsian's *Ancient Dances and Theatrical Performances of the Armenian People* is the accompanying illustrative material. The visual material is so rich and diverse that it could easily serve as the basis for several independent studies. The material can be divided into several parts:

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 355.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 399.

¹⁸ S. Lisitsian, *Starinnye plyaski i teatralnye predstavy armyanskogo naroda*, vol. 2, Yerevan 1972.

¹⁹ M. Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, Translation and Commentary on the Literary Sources by R.W. Thomson, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 1978.

- a) Photographs of ancient artwork samples, such as Hittite and Babylonian rock carvings, Greek vase paintings and reliefs, Egyptian murals and reliefs. The scenes of ritual dances and ceremonies depicted here complement the textual content. At the same time, Lisitsian notes that the dances themselves were the original inspiration for the appearance of these scenes in visual art.²⁰
- b) Images and photographs of Armenian national costumes ('taraz'). This is significant because the costume had particular importance in the performance of national dances.
- c) Photographs of ethnic communities. Lisitsian also uses the illustrative material to draw parallels between Armenian culture and the intangible cultural heritage of other ethnic groups.
- d) Pictures of musical instruments.
- e) Architectural layouts. These are presented to more vividly demonstrate where national dances were performed – both in closed and open spaces, which are discussed in detail in the textual section.

Srbuhi Lisitsian's studies were never published in full during her lifetime. Following her death in 1979, the third volume of *Ancient Armenian Dances*²¹ was published in 1983. This volume was compiled by Lisitsian's student, art historian Emma Khachatryan. It presents five chapters on tightrope dancers' performances, mourning dances, military dances, travel dances, and children's dances.

Conclusion

The key achievements of Srbuhi Lisitsian's work can be divided into three major areas. The first of these is her monograph *Movement Notation (Kinetography)* which is a foundational work in two respects: first in the context of the history of movement notation; and secondly, and more significantly, in the creation of an entirely new system of kinetography. 'The new system had several notable advantages over previous systems, including the use of just 32 symbols, simplicity in notation, and directionality from left to right. This system not only records movement, but also the degree of muscular tension and facial expressions. All of this is recorded on grid paper, using three primary spatial parameters: length, width, and height. The depiction of body positions is volumetric, accurately indicating the angles of movement. The positions of the head, shoulders, arms, wrists, and torso are also clearly noted. Movement accompanied by music is recorded under musical notes, and movement accompanied by words is recorded under the text.'²²

However, Lisitsian's kinetography system seems to have been overlooked in the works of Western researchers in the years following its creation and remains largely unrecognized even today (this may be due to geographical and language barriers). For instance, a detailed article entitled *Introduction to Dance Notation*²³ published in 1946 in the magazine *Dance Index* presents the history of dance notation from the fifteenth century to modern times, yet fails to mention Lisitsian's system. In the publication *Laban's Principles of Dance and Movement Notation*,²⁴ there are no comparisons with other systems of movement notation. Notably, Ann Hutchinson's chapter entitled 'A Brief History of Dance Notation'²⁵ makes no mention of Lisitsian's extensive work. Among other well-known twentieth-century works on movement notation, such as *An*

²⁰ S. Lisitsian, *Starinnye plyaski i teatralne predstavy armyanskogo Naroda*, vol. 2, p. 78.

²¹ S. Lisitsian, *Armianskie starinnye pliaski*, Yerevan 1983.

²² N. Kilichyan, 'Srbuhi Lisitsian: Bemadrog i hetazotog' [Srbuhi Lisitian: Choreographer and Researcher], *Hay azgagrutyun yev banahyusutyun: Nyuter yev usumnasirutyunner*, 2009, no. 26, p. 127.

²³ J. de Laban, 'Introduction to Dance Notation', *Dance Index*, vol. V, nos 4, 5, April–May 1946, pp. 89–127.

²⁴ R. von Laban, *Laban's principles of dance and movement notation*, London 1957 (first edition 1956).

²⁵ A. Hatchinson, *Labanotation: The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement*, New York 1977, pp. 1–5.



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Armenian Dance 'Ashiru Gyovnd', restored by the 'Karin' Scientific Center according to the notes of Srбуhi Lisitsian. Photo from the archive of the 'Karin' Scientific Center

Taniec ormiański *Ashiru Gyovnd* odtworzony przez Centrum Naukowe „Karin” według zapisków Srбуhi Lisitsian. Fot. z archiwum Centrum Naukowego „Karin”

*Introduction to Benesh Movement Notation: Dance*²⁶ by Rudolf and Joan Benesh, there is no mention of Lisitsian's system. Although her kinetography system would have been a valuable example for Margaret Abbie's *Movement Notation* report,²⁷ which discusses issues faced by researchers of movement notation, Lisitsian's name is absent. Despite the fact that her contributions have still not received the level of scholarly attention they deserve in the international literature, a notable Western acknowledgment can be found in Roderyk Lange's 1995 manual *Podręcznik kinetografii*.²⁸

At the same time, Lisitsian's cinematography found application in the countries of the former USSR. For instance, Maria Zhornitskaya used Lisitsian's method in her book *Folk Choreographic Art of the Indigenous People of Northeast Siberia*.²⁹ 'It is worth noting that in her description of dances, M.Y. Zhornitskaya applied the dance notation methodology of S.S. Lisitsian, which contributed to the accurate transmission of the main movements of Eskimo dances.'³⁰ Lisitsian's system was also used by Lydia Nagaeva in her book *Bashkir Folk Choreography*³¹ and by Natalia Alekseevna

²⁶ R. and J. Benesh, *An Introduction to Benesh Movement Notation: Dance*, New York 1969.

²⁷ M. Abbie, 'Movement Notation', *The Australian Journal of Physiotherapy*, June 1974, vol. XX, no. 2, pp. 61–69.

²⁸ R. Lange, *Podręcznik kinetografii*, Poznań 1995, p. 17.

²⁹ M. Zhornitskaya, *Narodnoe khoreograficheskoe iskusstvo korennoy naseleniya Severo-Vostochnoy Sibiri*, Moscow 1983.

³⁰ A. Lukina, 'M. Y. Zhornitskaya – Issledovatel' tantsyevogo fol'klora narodov Sibiri i Severa', *Culture and Civilization*, 2020, vol. 10, p. 52.

³¹ L. Nagayeva, *Bashkirskaya narodnaya khoreografiya*, Ufa 1995.



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Armenian Dance 'Karno Kochari', restored by the 'Karin' Scientific Center according to the notes of Srбуhi Lisitsian. Photo from the archive of the 'Karin' Scientific Center

Taniec ormiański *Karno Kochari* odtworzony przez Centrum Naukowe „Karin” według zapisków Srбуhi Lisitsian. Fot. z archiwum Centrum Naukowego „Karin”

Levotchkina in *Traditional Folk Choreography of the Siberian Tatars of the Barabinsk Steppe and the Omsk Pre-Irtysh Region (Late 19th – 20th century)*³² to describe Tatar choreography. Lisitsian's works provided the foundation for Davlat Ismagilovich Umerov's monograph *Choreographic Folklore of Astrakhan Tatars as a Factor in the Formation and Preservation of Cultural Identity*.³³

Srбуhi Lisitsian's movement notation system provides a detailed framework for documenting traditional Armenian dances. Her works have also been fundamental to Gagik Ginosyan, the founder of the *Karin* ethnographic ensemble. Ginosyan's efforts have resulted in the creation of a digital version of Lisitsian's kinetography system enabling the recording of dances via computer programs. This program has already facilitated the recording of twenty dances. The use of her notation system not only serves to preserve dance as a living cultural form and also its revitalization, it also allows future generations to learn and appreciate these dances in their original forms.

The most fundamental outcome of Lisitsian's work remains the preservation of Armenian dances. Her contributions have paved the way for a deeper understanding of the significance of dance in Armenian culture and its preservation as an intangible form of heritage. By documenting traditional dances, Lisitsian has provided a vital link to Armenia's cultural past, ensuring that these dances can be preserved for future generations and studied in their original forms. Her work has been largely continued by her students, including Emma Petrosyan and Genya

³² N. Lyovochkina, 'Traditsionnaia narodnaia khoreografiia Sibirskikh tatar Barabinskoi stepi i Omskogo Priirtysh'ya (konets XIX – XX v.)', *Kultura narodov Rossii* series, vol. 8, Novosibirsk 2002.

³³ D. Umerov, *Khoreograficheskii fol'klor astrakhanskikh tatar kak faktor formirovaniia i sokhraneniia kul'turnoi identichnosti* [Choreographic Folklore of the Astrakhan Tatars as a Factor in the Formation and Preservation of Cultural Identity], Kazan 2022.

Khachatryan. The documentation of national dances in their original form plays an invaluable role, especially when, during the Soviet era, Armenian national ethnic dances gave way to staged folk dances. While these staged dances incorporated some national elements, they began to be supplemented with classical dance elements, which resulted in a shift from their original national character. While staged dances may be more artistic and visually appealing, they unfortunately lose the underlying symbolism and layers of meanings and significance found in national ethnic dances. Another problematic issue here is that, as Anthony Shay states: 'Many individuals among the public largely believe the fiction that the choreographies they view on stage reflect actual dances as they would experience in a traditional field setting.'³⁴ Preserving the national dance was generally challenging during the Soviet years. It is worth noting that, after the publication of the first volume of Lisitsian's *Ancient Armenian Dances*, an article appeared in the newspaper *Pravda* which criticized the book for being overly comprehensive.³⁵

The importance of recording national dances has grown in parallel with the rapid development (or rather, perhaps more accurately, the transformation) of modern life. Once integral to the cultural identity of a nation, and passed down from generation to generation, national dances are now isolated from their original environment due to the impact of urbanization and globalization.

Another of Lisitsian's professional achievements relates to her methodological approach to dance preservation, which marks a significant step towards ethnochoreology. While documenting dances, she meticulously studied and classified Armenian dance heritage by form and content, while also applying broader analytical perspectives. She connected dances to the beliefs, customs, rituals, and celebrations of the Armenian people, explaining the origins of each dance or theatrical performance.

For example, her study of *Tightrope walking performances*³⁶ is distinguished by its analysis of dance acrobatic performances from the perspective of genre genesis. Using historical, linguistic, and ethnographic evidence, she traced their origins to prehistoric society's culture, rituals, and totemic theatrical performances related to fertility and ancestor worship. Based on the fact that ancient Armenia had a cult of birds and winged animals, Lisitsian suggested that elements of religious rituals were incorporated into such performances. For mythological winged figures, an 'aerial space for actions' was required, and the rope stretched at a certain height between trees served as such a 'stage'. Modern dance scholars have emphasized the challenges involved in reconstructing past performances based solely on visual artefacts. For instance, Judy Van Zile notes that many Korean dance images are artistically stylized rather than accurate records of actual performances.³⁷

A distinctive feature of Lisitsian's research was her use of folk terminology related to art and ethnography. Many of these terms are not included in standard Armenian dictionaries. She uncovered the original meanings of numerous terms, which had evolved over time due to shifts in people's way of thinking. Lisitsian compiled an extensive collection of folk and literary terms related not only to dance and theatre, but also to other forms of art.

Her ethnographic data and linguistic analysis of terms revealed not only Armenian dance principles but also aspects of cultural perception. According to Lisitsian, just as word roots evolve to reflect changes in daily life over time, the roots of dance movements also acquire new significance.

By documenting ancient Armenian dances, Lisitsian has ensured that they can be studied, revived, and performed in the future, thus safeguarding them against the threat of cultural loss. Her work also highlights the importance of recognizing the role of women in maintaining cultural traditions.

³⁴ A. Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*, Middletown 2002, p. 39.

³⁵ E. Petrosyan, 'Uchitel': *Vospominaniia o Srбуhi Lisitsian*, *Literaturnaya Armeniya*, 2020, no. 1, p. 148.

³⁶ S. Lisitsian, *Armianskie starinnye pliaski*, pp. 9–68.

³⁷ B. Spati, J. van Zile, *Imaging Dance: Visual Representations of Dancers and Dancing*, Zürich 2011, p. 47.

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