

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF A TRANSMISSION PROJECT FOR SAFEGUARDING CIRCASSIAN DANCES IN TURKEY*

Türkiye’deki Çerkes Danslarını Koruma Amaçlı Bir Aktarım Projesinin Kavramsal Çerçevesi

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ABSTRACT

This study essentially aims to put forward the conceptual framework for a transmission project for safeguarding the traditional dances of the people of Circassian origin living in Turkey. Today, due to modernisation and urbanisation, these dances are less and less known and practiced by the members of younger generations, and therefore, a transmission project which would bring different generations together is required. When structuring such a project is in question, significant questions such as what kind of transmission approach is to be chosen and which values must be given importance and priority in this approach emerge. In order to provide answers to these questions, the article identifies as its guides the basic principles in UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as well as the contextual approaches in dance studies which bring up criticisms regarding certain points in the convention. According to the convention, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage elements such as traditional Circassian dances begins with safeguarding the conditions that ensures the viability of these elements. Besides, UNESCO places particular emphasis on the involvement of local communities, which have until now kept these elements viable and have considered them as part of their identity, to this process of safeguarding. The article first discusses how these dances are viable within the Circassian community at their habitual cultural context, and deduces that these dances are shaped by the concepts of play and xabze that are peculiar to Circassian community. Xabze is the name given to unwritten rules and regulations, which determine almost all social behaviours in Circassian community. With the purpose of maintaining a social order that is based on respect, love and kindness, xabze sets forth strict rules, but it also has a flexible structure that is open to the transformation of these rules in order adapt to changing conditions. Being determined by xabze to a great extent, Circassian dances also provide a convenient environment for the transmission of xabze through generations. On the other hand, the dances in question are referred to with the term “play” both in Circassian languages and Turkish, and the way they are practiced bears the primary qualities of play and playing. As a result, in a project for safeguarding Circassian dances, this study proposes to embrace a transmission approach which prioritises before anything else the safeguarding of the two fundamental contextual elements that shape these practices: xabze and playfulness. At the end of the article, a proposal for a transmission project which follows this conceptual framework and which will be led by the members of Circassian community is presented in outline. In this proposed project, the researchers would act as catalysers of the communication of dance knowledge through generations rather than authorities who exercise control over this knowledge. In conclusion, the article aims to contribute to the fields of dance studies and intangible cultural heritage studies, as well as suggesting a conceptual framework for prospective transmission projects for safeguarding traditional Circassian dances and/or similar cultural elements.

Keywords

Circassian dances, transmission, intangible cultural heritage, play, xabze.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma temel olarak Türkiye’de yaşayan Çerkes toplumuna ait geleneksel dansları koruma amaçlı bir aktarım projesinin kavramsal çerçevesini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Günümüzde modernleşme ve kentleşme ile birlikte bu danslar genç nesillerin temsilcileri tarafından her geçen gün daha az bilinmekte ve icra edilmekte, bu nedenle farklı kuşakları bir araya getirecek bir aktarım projesine ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Böyle bir projenin oluşturulması söz konusu olduğunda, nasıl bir aktarım yaklaşımının tercih edilmesi, bu yaklaşımda hangi değerlere önem ve öncelik verilmesi gerektiği gibi önemli sorular ortaya çıkmaktadır. Makale bu soruları yanıtlamak üzere kendine, UNESCO’nun 2003 tarihli İnsanlığın Somut Olmayan Kültürel Mirasının Korunması Sözleşmesi içinde yer alan temel ilkelerin yanında, kimi zaman sözleşmedeki belli bazı

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noktalara eleştiriler getirebilen dans arařtırmalarındaki bağlamsal yaklařımları da kılavuz edinmiřtir. Adı geen szleřmeye gre, geleneksel erkes dansları gibi somut olmayan kltrel miras gelerinin korunması ncelikle bu gelerin yařamlarını srdrmelerine olanak veren řartların koruma altına alınmasıyla mmkndr. Ayrıca UNESCO buğne kadar bu geleri yařatmış olan ve kimliklerinin bir parası olarak gren yerel halkın koruma srecine dhil edilmesine zel nem vermektedir. Makalede ilk olarak bu dansların erkes toplumu iinde, alıřılagelmiş kltrel bağlamlarında ne řekilde yařadıkları tartıřılmış ve sz konusu topluma zg oyun ve xabze kavramları ile řekillendikleri sonucuna varılmıştır. Xabze, erkes toplumu iindeki hemen hemen tm toplumsal davranıřları belirleyen, yazılı olmayan kural ve dzenlemelere verilen isimdir. Amacı karřılıklı saygı, sevgi ve nezakete dayalı bir toplumsal dzeninin srdrlmesi olan xabze, katı kurallar ortaya koyduėu kadar deėiřen kořullara gre bu kuralların dnřmesine de aık olan esnek bir yapıya sahiptir. Byk lde xabze tarafından belirlenen erkes dansları aynı zamanda xabze'nin kuřaktan kuřaėa aktarımı iin de olduka uygun bir ortam saėlamaktadır. Bununla birlikte sz konusu danslar, hem erkes dillerinde hem de Trke'de "oyun" terimiyle anılmakta ve icra edilme biimleri de oyun ve oyun oynamaya ait temel zellikleri tařımaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu alıřma, erkes oyunlarını korumaya ynelik bir aktarım projesinde, her řeyden nce bu pratikleri řekillendiren iki temel bağlamsal genin –xabze ve oynusuluk– korunmasını n planda tutan bir aktarım yaklařımının benimsemesini nermektedir. Makalenin sonunda, bu kavramsal erveyi takip eden ve bařını erkes toplumu tyelerinin ekeceėi bir aktarım projesi nerisi genel hatlarıyla sunulmuřtur. nerilen bu projede arařtırmacılar dans bilgisini elinde tutan riteller konumunda olmaktan ziyade bu bilginin kuřaklar arası iletimindeki kolaylařtırıcılar olarak hareket edecektir. Sonu olarak makale, hem dans alıřmaları hem de somut olmayan kltrel miras alıřmaları alanına katkıda bulunmayı ve aynı zamanda gelecekte ortaya konacak geleneksel erkes dansları ve/veya buna benzer kltrel gelerin korunmasına ynelik aktarım projeleri iin de bir kavramsal erve sunmayı amalamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

erkes dansları, aktarım, somut olmayan kltrel miras, oyun, xabze.

Introduction: Circassian Dances as Intangible Cultural Heritage

This article aims to put forward the conceptual framework of a prospective transmission project for safeguarding the traditional dances that are practiced by the people of Circassian origin in Turkey, who emigrated from their homeland in Caucasus to Anatolia around 150 years ago.

Circassian (*erkes* in Turkish) is an umbrella term that is used to denote the people of North-Western Caucasus, who are composed of a number of different groups that speak cognate languages. Being forced to leave their homeland as a result of Russian occupation in the latter half of the 19th century, a great population of these groups had no choice but migrate to the land of the Ottoman Empire. Today, while only a minority of Circassians live in the Caucasus, the majority of diasporic communities live scattered in Turkey, and smaller numbers are found in Syria, Jordan, Israel and the former Yugoslav countries. For most Circassians living outside the homeland, their Circassian identity comes second or third, whereas the national identity of the countries that they are citizens of, and being Muslim, usually comes first. As a result, most of them – particularly the members of younger generations– use Circassian as a second language (Aslan et al. 2005:14–17, 40–44, 50–56, Smeets 1995:107–125). Nevertheless, unlike the language, certain Circassian customs have sustained their existence to a certain extent within diasporic communities. Today, Circassian dances are still practiced in contemporary Turkey, but due to rapid urbanisation and modernisation processes, every passing day, they are less and less widely known and practiced by younger generations. This contemporary reality brings about the need for an intergenerational transmission project.

When one attempts to suggest such a transmission project, a number of critical questions arise. The discussion in this study focuses on some of these questions: What

kind of a transmission approach must be employed for safeguarding Circassian dances in Turkey? In this approach, which values must be given importance and priority so that the outcomes of the project will be appropriate to the practice in question and effective for its goals?

It is important to note that, for answering these questions, this article identifies UNESCO's 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as a main point of reference. In the convention, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is defined as

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills –as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith– that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups [...], and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003:2).

The practice of Circassian dances in Turkey fits to a great extent in this definition. Being transmitted from generation to generation together with other sociocultural activities such as wedding customs, traditional games, etc. that aim to maintain the integrity of the culture in the circumstances of diaspora, these dances play an important role in constructing a sense of identity for the people of Circassian origin living in Turkey. Moreover, fulfilling UNESCO's foremost condition for being recognised as an ICH, the bearers of the practice regard it as part of their cultural heritage (Çatalkılıç and Erdem 2018:161–165, Şengül 2007). But what does “safeguarding” essentially mean? How can “intangible” cultural elements, which can disappear without a material trace, be safeguarded?

In UNESCO's (2003:3) convention, safeguarding is defined as “measures aimed at ensuring the viability of intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission [...], as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage”. In other words, for UNESCO, safeguarding an ICH before anything else means safeguarding the conditions that enable the viability of that ICH. Certainly, viability of an ICH such as a dance practice is subject to a great extent to the dynamism of the bearers of that element. If there are no active practitioners, then there is no dance at all. According to Mary Louise Pratt (2013:79), this fundamental characteristic of the concept of intangibility renders it closely related to the questions regarding transmission: “In contrast with material artefacts, intangible creations endure only through active, socially maintained processes of transmission from older to younger practitioners”. UNESCO (2003:1) seems to be aware of this fact, as the convention openly recognises that “communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of the intangible cultural heritage”. As pointed out by Janet Blake (2009:46), this expression in the convention gives local communities a central role in safeguarding an ICH. Hereby, the convention embraces a safeguarding approach which privileges the thoughts, desires and needs of the bearers of the ICH in question, and suggests the involvement of local communities in any kind of safeguarding activity.

The second point of reference that guides this study is the contextual approaches in dance studies. The preeminent principle that is embraced in these approaches is that a dance phenomenon should be researched, analysed and interpreted in relation to its cultural context. As American dance ethnographer Deidre Sklar (2001:30–31) puts

forward in her article ‘Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance’, “[m]ovement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge” and this knowledge “is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge” so that “[o]ne has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning”. In line with this thought, American dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku (2001:39–42) ironically demonstrates in her article ‘An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance’ how even a dance phenomenon like ballet, which is inaccurately believed to be acultural, is determined by cultural patterns and aesthetic values of the community to which it belongs. On the other hand, as Swiss dance anthropologist Andrée Grau stresses, despite the universalist fallacy claiming that dancing is universal as other kinds of human movement (1993:38–39), “dance can mean so different things to different people around the world” (1993:42). Therefore, in order to understand a dance phenomenon, it is quite important to understand how the actual bearers and practitioners of a dance see and think about their own experience.

Inspired by the above-mentioned ideas in UNESCO’s 2003 convention and guided by the contextual approaches in dance studies, the article starts with a description of how Circassian dances are practiced and transmitted in contemporary Turkey by focusing on their habitual existence. It hereby aims to identify the essential qualities of the cultural element in question, as well as the significant characteristics of its habitual mode of transmission. The basic argument of the article is that a transmission project which aims to safeguard Circassian dance practice in Turkey should be in harmony with these qualities and characteristics which have kept it viable throughout centuries. The article ends with a description of a transmission project proposal in outline with an aim to contribute to prospective efforts for safeguarding Circassian dances, as well as similar intangible cultural elements in Turkey and abroad.

Circassian Dance Practice in Turkey

In their research on the historical development of Caucasian dances in Turkey, Turkish dance researchers Gürbüz Aktaş and Tekin Koçkar (2007:21–23) underline the complexity of categorising these practices. To begin with, Caucasian communities living in Turkey are composed of quite a few different groups, including the Circassians such as the people of Adige, Abhaz, and Karaçay. Secondly, as these communities live scattered at different parts of the country, they have been culturally integrated with Turkish people to a great extent. Consequently, their dance practices have gone through a process of transformation, which has rendered them different from those that are presently practiced at the Caucasian homeland. Thirdly, certain Caucasian dances are also practiced in the neighbouring countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia (which the two researchers prefer to call Transcaucasian), and due to constant cultural interactions with the people of these countries, these have also had impact on the Caucasian dance practice in Turkey. Besides, in the last decades, some Caucasian dance choreographies were brought from abroad through imitation of the performances of professional dance companies. In total, Aktaş and Koçkar (2007:29–33) list 59 Caucasian and 47 Transcaucasian dances that are presently practiced.

In addition to these historical facts, it is important to note that in Turkey, traditional dances of rural origin are commonly called *oyun* –a term that basically means “play”, but also denotes “dance” and “game” (And 2012:36, Öztürkmen 2001:139). Circassian dances, which are at the focus of this research, are not an exception, and they are referred to by their practitioners *oyun* or *cegu*. *Cegu* also simultaneously means “play”,

“dance” and “game” in Circassian languages (Cerkes.net 2013). Circassian dances indeed very well represent the polysemy in these terms.

Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga is one of the prominent thinkers who conceptualize play and playing. As he describes,

play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is “different” from “ordinary life” (Huizinga 1980:28).

Huizinga (1980:164) argues that these and further qualities of playing render it closely connected with dancing. As he explains, play has been historically innate in the arts of poetry, music and dance, which share important common features with play such as being outside of the reasonable necessities and duties of practical life, but rather existing for bringing joy, as well as bearing values beyond logical ideas. Moreover, these arts are determined by binding rules as it is in playing, as they seek for rhythm and harmony (Huizinga 1980:158–172). Consequently, Huizinga (1980:165) enounces that “[d]ancing is a particular and particularly perfect form of playing”. Considering Circassian dances within this conceptual framework, which will be referred to as Circassian *oyuns* from this point on, one can easily notice that they follow a culturally determined system of rules which introduce them into the scope of “playing”.

There are many Circassian *oyuns* that are practiced in Turkey – *kafe*, *leperuj*, *şesen*, etc. The Circassian *oyuns* cannot be practiced at any time or anywhere. In order to practice them, there has to be a social gathering like a wedding ceremony or *zehes*. *Zehes* is a kind of traditional party for young people, in which they socialise, dance, play games, and might find or spend time with their *kaşens*. *Kaşen* is the name given to single boys or girls who are in a traditional form of pre-marital flirt relationship. The rules of *oyuns* are not fixed, but change according to the purpose and content of the gathering. In order to start, first a *thamate* (*thamade*, *temate*, the person in charge of keeping the event in order) and a *guadze* (*quedze*, *hatiyago*, the assistant of *thamate*) have to be elected. If the event is not among youngsters only, the *thamate* has to be an elder and respected member of the community, whereas the *guadze* is a youngster, preferably someone with a musical taste. These two, who are responsible of the order and harmony of the whole event, first decide who is going to play the musical instruments, and then organise the space. In summer, the location of the gatherings is an open space in the village, and in winter, they are organised inside the houses. The organisation of the space is as follows: A group of men take their place next to a long timber, as they will be keeping time by beating the timber with sticks, as well as singing and cheering. The women and men who wish to practice *oyuns* form two separate lines on either side of the timber, standing by facing the group of opposite sex. Spectators, who will also help keeping time by clapping hands, take their place across the timber group. The event starts with relatively slower *oyuns*, and continues with those with livelier rhythms. The event usually becomes most exciting when the fastest *oyun* called *şesen* is practiced. *Şesen* is based on a male chasing a female and driving her into a corner with vibrant movements, while the female tries to escape with elegant turns. Although most Circassian *oyuns* depend basically on creative improvisation, through which individuals display their skills by executing certain figures selected from an already known repertoire, the whole practice has to follow strict rules. Who starts a certain *oyun*, how the couples are formed, who has to go in and out when, how one invites the other, what should be done while accepting or refusing invitations, etc. are all regulated by the customs, and controlled by the *thamate* and the *guadze* of the gathering. For example, in the relatively

slower opening *oyuns* such as *kafe*, the couples have to be composed of close relatives or *kaşens*. On the other hand, *şeşen* is practiced by constantly changing partners. If the event is a wedding, it is launched by a male from the groom's side, who circles the field first, and then invites a female. After a while, another male takes his place. Then, another female takes the place of the first female, and the *oyun* continues in this manner. The changing of partners must follow certain rules. For example, even if the invited female wants to refuse dancing with the inviter, she has to circle the field at least once, while the male tries to block her path. If the female fails to complete the circle, she cannot go out of the field, but has to continue dancing. In some cases, the female group may decide to play a trick on a certain male and make him dance until he gets exhausted. As a reaction, the male group may interfere in the situation to save the victim or take revenge if they can find the female leader who organised this trick. During the practice of *şeşen*, physical contact is strictly forbidden. If someone does not follow the rules in any of the *oyuns*, s/he is punished by the *thamate* and/or the *guadze*. Usually, the punishments are executed for fun, but if the offense is very serious, the person in fault may be excluded from the social gatherings for a certain period of time (Çatalkılıç and Erdem 2018:161–165, Fuat1126 2013, *Kafkas Vakfı* 2013, Kaya and Özel 2009, Şengül 2007).

The transmission of Circassian *oyuns* habitually occurs on an informal basis. The members of the community who participate in social gatherings starting from puberty learn the *oyuns* and their rules as one learns his/her native language. In this oral kinaesthetic mode of transmission, they watch and emulate the practice of the elders, and then, after having attained a certain level of competence, they directly participate in *oyuns* (Kaya and Özel 2009, Şengül 2007).

Xabze

The habitual practice and transmission of Circassian *oyuns* described above are attached to a broader set of unwritten social rules and regulations, which are very effective within Circassian community. This set of regulations, which is called *xabze* (*khabze*) in Circassian languages and transmitted through generations, aims to create a social order based on reciprocal respect, love and kindness among community members. Starting from early childhood, all Circassians are supposed to act according to *xabze*, as the value given to an individual by the community depends on his/her compliance with *xabze* and noncompliance will eventually lead to exclusion from the community. For instance, within Circassian community, hosting a guest is very important. The family or the individual who has a guest feels honoured, and takes great care of him/her. Besides, each member of Circassian community is responsible from the people in need, and the support must be lent confidentially. If something is done within a group, one member of this group becomes the *thamate* of the duty or action at hand, whereas a second member acts as the *guadze*, as is the case in the practice of Circassian *oyuns* (Aslan et al. 2005:57–63, Circassian Diaspora in Turkey 2013).

Although at first sight one might think that *xabze* is essentially a set of moral norms, it indeed also regulates almost all physical acts of a Circassian in social life. In the simplest terms, it is still common for a Circassian living in a village to stand up as someone passes by, due to his/her respect for the other person (Yavan 2010:64). Similarly, one might easily notice the traces of *xabze* on the physical actions of the practitioners of *oyuns*. For instance, during the practice of *şeşen*, both men and women wait for their turn by standing silently and respectfully in a line, and they do not touch their partners, as this would be socially offensive (Fuat1126 2013).

Indeed, all these details described above render Circassian *oyuns*, as well as the social events to which they are attached, important means of transmitting *xabze* through generations. Attending these events and practicing various *oyuns* besides other activities in these events, the members of younger generations get the opportunity to learn *xabze* through actual embodiment. At this point, the question is how all these qualities that characterise the habitual practice of Circassian *oyuns* can inform a transmission project for safeguarding this practice.

The Question of Authenticity

“You are destroying what I love”. These are the critical words of a young man, who was in the 1970s among the audience of a concert of Yugoslav folk dance and songs directed by American dance scholar and choreographer Nancy L. C. Ruyter (1995:269). In fact, the reaction of the young man epitomises typical debates on change and authenticity to which one is exposed while dealing with a traditional dance outside its habitual sociocultural context.

While discussing different attitudes that are at work towards consciously sustained traditional dances in his country, Norwegian dance researcher Egil Bakka (2002:69) points out that “[a]uthenticity may very often turn into the question of whose authenticity”. As he explains, the most emotionally involved attitude belongs to “heirs”, who consider themselves as the direct inheritors of the practice in question, and feel entitled to some sort of moral authority over the tradition with a belief that there has not been any important break in the continuity, whereas those with a “user” attitude think and act in a more practical and pragmatic way. As the interest of the “users” in folk culture is derived from a desire to use them for more general purposes like pleasure or construction of national and/or local identities, they do not avoid modification of folkloric material for contemporary needs (Bakka 1994:117–118, Bakka 2002:62–63). In fact, Ruyter’s confrontation with the young man exemplifies a possible debate that might emerge between a “user” (an American folk dance choreographer) and an “heir” (a common Yugoslav person), who judge authenticity from different perspectives.

Dance scholars usually take a position in-between these two polarised attitudes, which are determined by the level of tolerance they have towards change in tradition. Dance scholar Judy Van Zile (2001:7–9), who has an international folk dance background in U.S.A., relates the arguments against modification of traditional dances in contemporary creations to a common fallacy that is peculiar to our age, which implicitly considers the tradition as something intact, something that has taken its form long ago and has been kept unchanged until today. Drawing attention to how Korean court dancers incorporated elements of Chinese dances into their own repertoire in the 12th century, she reminds us that the process of modifying dances of the past to create something new has been going on for centuries. However, some European scholars –particularly those who come from countries with a rich dance heritage– seem much more sensitive towards any change in tradition. Bakka, in fact, is among them. Nevertheless, he argues that “researchers” like him exhibit a third attitude that is different from “users” and “heirs”. In this sense, he proposes doing extensive research on dances in their habitual contexts so that it will be possible to ensure that consciously sustained versions of these practices will preserve traditional qualities and make a truthful depiction of the past (Bakka 1994:118, Bakka 2002:63–64). Bakka (2002:68) makes no secret of his hope that one day, as a result of the efforts of researchers, traditional Norwegian dances will be re-established “in the most faithful way possible”.

Although Van Zile and Bakka seem to be exhibiting two contrasting attitudes towards authenticity, this does not prevent them from sharing a common oversight. When they talk about change in a dance, they basically refer to a change in the form. Nevertheless, change in a dance is not change per se. Changes do not occur in space or in vitro; rather, every change is attached to a specific context. As dance anthropologist Jane Desmond (1993:33–59) explains very well in her discussion in the article ‘Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies’ on the transmission of dance styles from one (cultural, class, race, etc.) group to another, any borrowing, appropriation, transmission, migration, remodeling, recreation, etc. happens in a particular context, which is characterised by a certain discourse that guides the nature and the result of the change in question. In their discussion on the transformation of traditional dances into tourist entertainment in Greece, English dance anthropologist Georgiana Gore and Greek folk dance researcher Maria Koutsouba (1994:29–32) illustrate how this new existence of “Greek” dances reflects the discourse of the conditions that has led to this change –that is, the context of consumer capitalism and “commoditisation” which does not demand something “authentic”, “real” or “traditional”, but something that is capable of projecting marketable images of Greekness that appeal to popular taste. Aktaş and Koçkar (2007:20–21) dwell on similar circumstances in today’s Turkey in relation to the practice of Caucasian *oyuns*. They specify that most of the people who presently practice, teach and interpret Caucasian *oyuns* in Turkey have no knowledge of which *oyuns* represent which cultural group, and some are illiterate to the differences between the *oyuns* practiced in Turkey and the Caucasian homeland. Worst of all, some practitioners also have no knowledge about the values inherent in Caucasian culture. The result is the creation of a cultural “chaos”, and even a cultural “harassment”, as what are performed as Caucasian *oyuns* are sometimes no more than collages of imitations taken from here and there to create “shows”. In this sense, it is not surprising that Koçkar (1987:19–20) starts his book on training methods and techniques of Caucasian *oyuns* by explaining the culturally determined aesthetic values that characterize the habitual realizations of these practices.

On the other hand, Turkish folklorists Ahmet Çakır (1990:42) and Türker Eroğlu (1994:36) complain about an unfavourable decontextualization of traditional Turkish *oyuns* as a result of modern forms of staging. Çakır (1990:42) enunciates a general “degeneration”, which, according to him, has begun with the separation of these practices from their habitual context for the purpose of staging. As he explains, in their habitual context, people practice these *oyuns* when they want, for as long as they want, and by executing many repetitions in an improvisatory way. However, the stage adaptations made by the choreographers are determined by fixed arrangements, which in most cases elicit changes in the form of the original dances, as well as bringing about a loss of the habitual free style. Although Çakır basically identifies the “degeneration” with a change in the dance form like Bakka, his pointing out of the differentiation between the realizations of Turkish *oyuns* in their habitual context and the staging context is rather insightful. Turkish historian Arzu Öztürkmen (2003:48–49) discusses the same problem by illustrating how physical education expert Selim Sırrı Tarcan created in 1920s an ordered choreography with pre-determined movements out of the Turkish *oyun* referred to as *zeybek* so that it could be staged as a national dance, even though *zeybek* is habitually practiced by free improvisations according to an existing repertoire of traditional movements. Apparently, when adapted for staging, *oyuns* are under the threat of losing their inherent free style.

Certainly, it is not reasonable to propose a transmission project for a practice like Circassian *oyuns* and claim that this project will safeguard it without any change. But one can still design the context of change hoping that it will help the transmission, “in the most faithful way possible”, of a practice of the past that is gradually disappearing. At this point, the question is: To what exactly one should be faithful in safeguarding Circassian *oyuns*? Or in other words, what precisely should be safeguarded in Circassian *oyuns* in order to safeguard them?

In his article ‘Third Dimension on Turkish Folklore Researches’, Turkish folklorist Metin Ekici (2003:18) points out that even though the concepts of “traditional” and “change” might seem contradictory, change of the traditional is inevitable. But whereas the change that conflicts with the existing social aspects and values is commonly regarded as negative and “degeneration”, the change that is compatible with these is positive and “improvement”. According to this formula, any change in the practice of Circassian *oyuns* in Turkey, which is incompatible with *xabze* should be regarded as “degeneration”.

What to Learn from the Tradition?

“[W]hat has preserved this culture is the existence of rules which regulate not only the *oyuns*, but also their execution” (Kaya and Özel 2009).

One of the reasons that *xabze* has been preserved against passing time and the changing world is that it does not include inflexible, frozen, unchanging rules except for its basic principles. Some rules have the flexibility of changing according to time and conditions (Circassian Diaspora in Turkey 2013).

These quotations from two different “heirs” of Circassian *oyuns*, might seem contradictory, nevertheless they are rather complementary. They both imply that it is the existence of rules that has sustained the Circassian culture until today; not the forms of these rules, but rather the underlying principles, the *xabze*, which creates and recreates these rules in different forms according to the needs of changing conditions. In other words, rules change, but the context or the discourse of change, that is, *xabze*, continues to exist.

Certainly, safeguarding such an entity like *xabze* is beyond the limits of a dance transmission project. Nevertheless, identifying the qualities that are brought by *xabze* in Circassian *oyuns* might guide us in constructing an appropriate transmission approach that would help the safeguarding of these practices, in the sense Aktaş and Koçkar (2007:20–21) wish for.

As mentioned above, flexibility and respect towards one another are two important features that characterise *xabze*. The reflections of these two principles can easily be recognised in the practice of Circassian *oyuns*. The adaptability of rules according to the purpose and content of social gatherings, as well as the improvisatory structure in the practice that encourages creativity, very well exhibits the principle of flexibility. Besides, the respect between community members is ensured in the *oyuns* by the existence of strict rules. Nevertheless, one cannot argue that these rules hinder the pleasure and joy that is generated by the practice (Kaya and Özel 2009). In this sense, “respect”, “flexibility”, “creativity”, and “playfulness” come forward as the essential qualities of Circassian *oyuns*, which should be kept safe within an ideal transmission project.

In fact, as explained in the introduction, the definition of safeguarding made by UNESCO does not cast out, but on the contrary, embraces the ideals of flexibility and creativity with an expectation of the preservation of intangible cultural elements beyond turning them into frozen forms. Nevertheless, as Pratt (2013:80) reports, when an intangible cultural element is considered endangered or “dying”, often, there begin certain

“salvage operations” for guaranteeing the transmission of the cultural element in question to future generations. But these operations “involve the conversion of the intangible into tangible materializations –recordings, transcriptions, grammars. This is the passage from live (evolving) transmission to dead (non-evolving) transmission” (Pratt 2013:81). In order to avoid the emergence of a dead form of transmission, any project for safeguarding a practice like Circassian *oyuns* has to be vigilant against such tendencies that bring about the threat of tangibilizing the intangible.

Safeguarding the Spirit of “Playing”

Considering the inextricable relationship of Circassian *oyuns* with the community life, it is quite evident that a transmission project for safeguarding them must employ a holistic approach, which takes into account the broader sociocultural context of the practice and the traditional spirit attached to it. As such a project would aim at fulfilling the needs of the bearers of the cultural element in question, it would ideally be led by Circassian people who are currently active under the umbrella of NGOs both at rural and urban areas in Turkey.

To begin with, conducting extensive research in the habitual context of Circassian *oyuns* is very important, as there is a need to bring further reveal the underlying cultural principles that govern this practice. This research would ideally be conducted by a team, which is composed of researchers of dance and folklore and voluntary members of the community. This team would be expected to visit selected Circassian communities that exist scattered throughout Turkey, doing research on the *oyuns* in question by participating in the social gatherings and getting acquainted with community members who can participate in the intergenerational transmission process. The collected data would better be analysed by employing a holistic cultural approach so that the researched practices would not be decontextualized, but instead identified as an important component of the Circassian culture in Turkey.

Subsequent to this first phase, comes the designing of the transmission process. Taking the traditional structure as a model, the context of transmission would ideally be planned in the form of informal social gatherings, which would include not only the practice of *oyuns* but also traditional customs of socialisation such as conversations between *kaşens*, singing, playing games, etc. Following the traditional spirit might be helpful in dealing with possible difficulties and dissonances that might emerge. Rather than imposing fixed rules to the participants, the flexibility and creativity in *xabze* can be employed and the participants can modify the transmission context according to their own needs. During the whole transmission process, making an effort for safekeeping the playful spirit in the *oyuns* would be helpful in sustaining the qualities that traditionally exist within the practice in question. Not only in these events, but also during the whole process, the members of the research team would act as the catalysers of the communication of dance knowledge between community members instead of authorities who exercise control over this knowledge.

On the other hand, in these events, it is crucial to sustain the habitual mode of oral, kinaesthetic transmission, although it might be fragile in terms of safeguarding due to its intangible and therefore temporary nature. Nevertheless, giving up this mode would be unfavourable for the viability of Circassian *oyuns* due to two reasons. Firstly, as Çakır (1990:42) warns us, leaving the habitual practice of traditional *oyuns* leads to a loss of their playful free style. Secondly, employing a formal mode of non-oral transmission might bring about the emergence of dead transmission in the sense that Pratt

(2013:80–81) warns us, due to the use recordings, movement transcriptions, identification of dance grammars, etc.

In 2017, a traditional practice from Turkmenistan –the Kushtdepdi rite of singing and dancing– which is also habitually transmitted through an oral, kinaesthetic mode, has been inscribed on UNESCO’s ICH list. The nomination file, which was submitted to UNESCO, presents the practice in question to a large extent in relation to its socio-cultural context (Turkmenistan 2016:3–4). Nevertheless, although the file includes a detailed description and tacit appreciation of how the practice is orally transmitted from masters to novices (Turkmenistan 2016:4–5) and features the role of the actual bearers within the proposed safeguarding measures (Turkmenistan 2016:10–11), the significance of sustaining the viability of this habitual mode of transmission seems rather overlooked. The measures proposed for safeguarding the Kushtdepdi rite of singing and dancing basically involves conducting field researches and making recordings so that a digital catalogue, booklets, digital sources on the internet, training kits for formal education, a documentary, stage performances, national workshops, international collaborations, etc. would be prepared/realized (Turkmenistan 2016:8–10). The file also briefly mentions plans for researching “literary, choreographic and ethnographical values of the element” and facilitating informal trainings that would be conducted by the masters (Turkmenistan 2016:9). As is seen, the majority of the proposed measures, except the last two, verges on tangibilization of this intangible cultural element. This is, in fact, due to an inherent contradiction within the concept of ICH itself, which has been highlighted by Gore and Grau (2014:121): “it promotes a universalistic ideology whilst simultaneously defending the cultural and property rights of communities”. Whereas the Turkmen nomination file on one hand fancies featuring the local sociocultural elements such as the oral habitual mode of transmission and the traditional bearers of the practice, on the other hand, it cannot help but propose safeguarding measures that might contradict with these elements for the purpose of enhancing the universal visibility and the permanence of the heritage in question.

The detailed analysis of Circassian *oyuns* in their habitual context appraises that a similar contradiction might easily emerge in their safeguarding. Therefore, a prospective transmission project should first and foremost concentrate on safeguarding the inherent and idiosyncratic spirit of “playing” that is particular to the habitual transmission of these practices, which necessarily renders documentation, recordings, movement analyses, creation of performances, etc. as subsidiary measures and tools that would be used to serve, but not contradict with, this central purpose.

Conclusion

Being inspired by UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (ICH)*, as well as presenting a critique of it through the lens of the contextual approaches in dance studies, this article has aimed to suggest the conceptual framework of a transmission project for safeguarding Circassian *oyuns* in Turkey. Sharing UNESCO’s sensitivity about the involvement of local communities that are associated with the ICH in question, it attempted to identify the culture-specific value system in Circassian community, as it is what has given the basic characteristics to these movement practices, as well as keeping them viable for centuries. It is discovered that the practices in question are shaped by *xabze* –a set of strict, but at the same time flexible social rules and regulations that aims at creating reciprocal respect, love and kindness among the members of Circassian community– and a playful spirit, which encourages creativity and brings fun. In conclusion, the article argued that a transmis-

sion project for safeguarding Circassian *oyuns* in Turkey should employ a contextual approach that would be inspired by these two underlying principles: *xabze* and playfulness.

This study aims to contribute to the academic knowledge in two fields: dance studies and studies on ICH. By putting forward a contextual approach on Circassian *oyuns* in Turkey, which prioritises the way they are practiced and transmitted in their habitual environment, it hopes to provide new theoretical knowledge on the topic, which would be benefited by both international dance research and Turkish folk dance scholarship. On the other hand, trying to answer critical questions that arise when one attempts to design a transmission project for safeguarding Circassian *oyuns* in Turkey, it aims to pave the way for the actual construction of such a project, which might sanguinely serve as a model for similar projects. As mentioned above, Circassian people live in diaspora not only in Turkey. Between 2009-2012, the “Mediterranean Living Heritage Project (MedLiHer)” was realized by UNESCO with the support of the European Union with the objective of the implementation of the ICH convention in four neighbouring countries –Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (UNESCO 2021b). One of the cultural elements that have been listed in the inventory reports of the project is the Circassian and Chechen oral heritage in Jordan, of which Circassian *oyuns* are a component (UNESCO 2021a). Considering these recent affairs, this study also hopes to inspire international collaborations for identifying and safeguarding Circassian *oyuns* in other diaspora countries like Jordan, such as the submission of a common nomination file to UNESCO

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