Ukraine - The Hopak

The hopak is often popularly referred to as the “National Dance of Ukraine”.



Hopak by Military Ukrainian Dance Ensemble

It is a folk dance originating as a male dance among the Zaporozhian Cossacks. It is derived from the verb hopaty (гопати), meaning “to hop”.

The dance developed from the 16th century as a Cossack social dance. Returning victorious after battle, warriors would play music and dance to burn off energy. At the time only male performers would dance. As untrained dancers, they would improvise most of their steps, which were designed to demonstrate their skill, strength and prowess. The dances included many acrobatic steps, and often reenactments of battles.

In later centuries, hopak-style dances began to be performed in villages, this time including female performers, and often incorporating structural elements such as circle forms. From the eighteenth century, hopak-style dances began to be performed on stage in peasant theatres, and professional troupes began to include such dances as part of their performance.

In the early twentieth century, the ethnochoreologist Vasyl Verkhovynets researched traditional Ukrainian dance steps and began to create dances which reflected Ukrainian cultural tradition. With his disciple Vasyl Avramenko, he founded dance troupes in many Ukrainian villages. In 1935, Verkhovynets sent a troupe to the First International Festival of the Folk Dance in London performing what became known as the “London Hopak”. This was a 3-part dance, consisting of a men's dance (much like the original Kozak dance), a second, slower segment danced only by women, and finally a rousing closing with both male and female dancers sharing the stage. The dance won first prize, and the format was adopted by many hopak troupes across Ukraine.

Modern-day Hopak is designed to seem improvised, with many acrobatic feats. Music is not standardised by tempo or melody, but often ends on a fast pace and sometimes incorporates boisterous Ukrainian marches.

Male dancers typically wear voluminous trousers called sharavary with a pair of kicky red hussar boots, while female dancers wear a poltava costume that includes a kersetka, an embroidered vest with a slight peplum, a vyshyvanka top, and the flower crown with ribbon streamers called a vinok. The embroidery on the garments can indicate the region or town the dancers come from. The outfits reflect the military and peasant origins of the hopak.

India - Bharatanatyam

Bharatanatyam is a major form of Indian classical dance that originated in Tamil Nadu (a state in southern India).



A Bharatanatyam dancer

The *Natya Shastra* by Bharata Muni and *Abhinaya Darpana* (Mirror of Gesture) by Nandikeshvara are considered to be the original sources of Bharatanatyam. It is one of the eight widely recognized Indian classical dance forms, and expresses South Indian religious themes and spiritual ideas, particularly of Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism, collectively Hinduism.

The ancient Tamil epic *Silappatikaram*, dating from the second century CE, contains a description of Bharatanatyam. Temple sculptures from the 6th to the 9th centuries provide evidence that it was a highly refined performance art by then.

Bharatanatyam contains different types of banis. Bani, or 'tradition', is a term used to describe the dance technique and style specific to a guru or school. These are usually named according to the village of the guru. The style features a fixed upper torso, bent legs, flexed knees, amazing footwork, and a vocabulary of sign language making use of the hands, eyes and face muscles. Traditionally, the dance interprets myths and legends from the Hindu tradition.

The performance repertoire of Bharatanatyam, like other classical dances, includes nrita (pure dance), nritya (solo expressive dance) and natya (group dramatic dance).
Throughout the 19th century, this dance form was exclusive to Hindu temples. It was banned by the British colonial government in 1910, but there were protests, and performances later took place beyond temples. Modern stage productions are now popular throughout India.

The dance form traditionally features a solo artist accompanied by musicians and backing singers. The soloist wears a colourful sari and jewellery, resembling a Tamil Hindu bridal dress. Costumes are beautiful as these dances were originally performed at court and on special occasions. They are designed to drape around the body and create pleasing images and shapes during movement. Dancers wear leather anklets on their feet, with bells attached - these emphasise the rhythm of the music. Dancers also wear thick makeup, which help emphasise their gestures and facial expressions.

Ghana - Adowa

Adowa is a popular traditional dance in Ghana, danced by the Akan people.



Two young girls dancing Adowa

It is performed at cultural ceremonies like festivals, funerals, engagements, and celebrations. The Adowa dance is a sign of expression that allows performers to communicate their emotions and feelings through their hands and feet. There are different hand movements performed for each setting: people will communicate positive emotions at weddings or engagements and negative emotions at funerals.

The dancers use different movements of their hands to symbolise and tell a story. This body language is accentuated by the use of a handheld linen cloth. The short dance steps are very subtle, drawing attention to the upper part of the body.

An adowa ensemble comprises a lead singer, a chorus and percussion instruments. Historians believe the dance originated from the movement of the antelope - called ‘adowa’ in the Akan language. Traditionally, women used to perform this dance, but nowadays men can also take part.

This music is characterised by polyrhythmic accents: the dance is in compound triple time and the accompaniment of the drums is interwoven with syncopations and cross-rhythms. A bell plays a steady rhythm, to which the chorus sings the responses. The lyrics of the songs express social and moral values.

Dancers wear a piece of cloth wrapped around their body from their knees to their chest. This is usually Kente, a woven patterned cloth made by the inhabitants of Bonwire, a town in the Ashanti region. Costumes traditionally reflect the cultural ceremony at which the dance is taking place: for instance, black and white colours are usually worn at funerals. At other occasions, colourful patterns are worn, reflecting royalty, wealth and status.