

# Armenian Dance

Laura Shannon

## Armenian Territory and History

The present-day Armenian republic is a small and extremely mountainous area about the size of Belgium or Massachusetts, with a population of only 3 million. Formerly, Armenia covered a huge territory, including the mountains of what are now Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the vast plateau which extends from eastern Anatolia in Turkey to the southern Caucasus and partly into Iran, Iraq and Syria. This great plateau is home to Mount Ararat, the symbol of the Armenian nation and also a symbol of exile: its breast-shaped profile dominates the view from Yerevan, Armenia's capital, but the mountain itself is now in Turkish territory.

The Anatolian plain is one of the world's oldest centres of civilisation. The Armenians, descendants of a branch of Indo-Europeans, settled after the fifth century B.C.E. and established the first Christian state in 301 C.E. A strong cultural identity was established early on, largely thanks to the invention of the Armenian alphabet in 406 C.E. Other inhabitants included Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Assyrians and Turks. While this resulted in an extremely rich and varied folklore, there was also constant strife among the various peoples.

During the first World War, the long history of pogroms and persecution by the Ottoman Turks erupted in a campaign which led to the mass murder of over one and a half million Armenians between 1915 and 1922. These events were officially recognised as genocide by the United Nations in 1985 and 1986, by the European Parliament in 1987 and by France in 1998. Turkey, however, still refuses to recognise the genocide.

Those Armenians who survived the massacres and deportations were forced to flee from the Anatolian region. In this Diaspora, some went south to Syria and other Arab countries, some north to what became Soviet Armenia in 1920, some east to Asia, some west to Greece and the rest of Europe, and hundreds of thousands across the Atlantic to North America, where there are significant expatriate communities in Los Angeles, Fresno, Detroit, Washington, and other cities.

## Armenian Dance

As in other immigrant communities, exiled Armenians sought to reaffirm their ethnic identity through dance and music. Traditional dancing is still popular among expatriate Armenians, and has been successfully 'exported' to international folk dance groups and circle dance groups all over the world. Generally, I place Armenian dances into four categories: dances from Eastern Caucasian Armenia, from Western Anatolian Armenia, from Greater Armenia, and diaspora dances. These categories may overlap somewhat, and some dances such as **Tamzara** and **Gyovand** are found everywhere, but they help give a broad picture of the landscape of Armenian dance as I understand it. A general differentiation can also be made between village folk dances and those which have been arranged or choreographed by professional ensembles; between the dances found in Armenia today and those now danced mainly in expatriate communities; and between the circle and line dances where everyone joins in, and the women's lyrical solo folk dances improvised by just one or two women.

Based on movements from nature and the animal world, I believe these women's lyrical

dances such as **Garabneri Bar**, **Grounkner**, **Dou im Yeghek** and **Tzaghkatz Baleni** are living descendants of shamanistic traditions from central Asia which date back at least twenty thousand years. In this tradition, the shaman uses music, rhythm and movements to bring the benevolent powers of the natural world into the human community, just as the lyrical dancers do today. Similarly, ritual dances such as Gyond, Govand or Gyovand, and particularly women's circle dances such as **Maymuki**, **Yerek Votk**, **Gorani** and the women's **Tamzara** from Lake Sevan reveal a deeply intimate connection with the earth, source of all life. This ancient reverence for the earth is a worldview shared by the earliest civilisations in Europe and Asia. Goddess figures in the archaeological record personify the divine feminine as the embodiment of sacred earth energy; the goddess is also connected with the sun. In the Christian era, the divine feminine is of course still worshipped as Mother Mary (Mairam), who is honoured in dances such as **Mairam Govand**.

### Dances from Eastern Caucasian Armenia

Eastern Caucasian Armenia is now the area of the tiny landlocked present-day republic of Armenia. **Mom Bar**, meaning 'candle dance', comes from the village of Martuni by Lake Sevan, and is traditionally the last dance done at wedding parties. The candles are blown out at the end of the dance, indicating to the guests that it is time to go home. Different versions of **Harsaneek**, also originally a 'mom' or candle dance, come from Kumajri (Leninakan) and various other parts of the east, as do many exquisite forms of the women's solo improvisational style known as 'naz bar', or 'grace dance', on which are based the choreographed movements of dances such as **Archka Yerezanke**, **Garabneri Bar**, **Djermag Aghavni**, **Grounkner** and **Tzaghkatz Baleni**. Embodying elements from nature such as the Crane, Dove, Swan, Reed or Flowering Cherry Tree, these dances were originally danced as solo improvisations to bring these natural powers into being. There are now many lyrical choreographies in circle form arranged by Shakeh Avanesian, Eddie Djololian and other Armenian teachers.

### Dances from Western Anatolian Armenia

Many Armenian dances from Western Anatolia, territory which is now in Turkey, now thrive in other parts of the world, passed on by those who fled the massacres. **Sepastia Bar**, from the region of Sepastia, is well known in many versions among Sepastari communities in the USA. **Ooska Gookas** and its musical sibling **Shavali** come from the city of Erzeroum in the Karin region, as do **Medax Tashginag**, **Erzroumi Shoror**, and several versions of **Tamzara**. From Shatagh come **Shatagi Shoror** and **Nare**, named for the goddess of water and fire. **Maymuki** and **Mairam Govand** are from Vaspurakan; **Laz Bar** is from the coast of the Black Sea. As with other dances of people who fish the Black Sea, the shoulder shimmy in **Laz Bar** is said to represent the movements of the fish.

The Anatolian region of Daron or Taron, which gives us **Yerek Votk**, **Pompoorig**, **Sirdes**, **Lourke Lourke** and of course the well-loved and enigmatic **Daronee**, was one of the most terribly devastated by the deportations and massacres. Most of the Armenians living there were killed, a few escaped, and a few remained, saving their lives by successfully passing as Turkish. Some half a century later, in the late 1960's, Azat Gharibian, choreographer of the Armenian State Song and Dance Ensemble, ventured back into Daron to find the 'disguised' Armenians and to collect what they remembered of their pre-diaspora dance and music traditions. The dance we know as **Daronee** was put together by Azat from fragments he collected in Daron. It is part of a large family of dances & songs known as 'Gorani', in which the loss of the homeland is equated with the loss of the beloved. The haunting song was recorded at that time by the ensemble's orchestra. Tom Bozigian, who taught me **Daronee** as he had learned it from Azat Gharibian, told me in 1987 that no

translation was available because of the archaic dialect, but happily Shakeh Avanesian and Arax Badalian managed to translate it in 1996.

This is our old Valley of Moosh. The village is standing.  
The breath is green, alive; it is a remedy for my love.  
Gorani, my love, Gorani  
Promise me news that is a cure for my pain

May God curse the evil man, let him become old and gray  
I love a young one, and they say leave him [or her]  
Gorani, my love, Gorani  
I love a young one, they say forget him

Alashkert, Malazkert, full of joy  
The chest of my love is decorated with the akhanush [a style of jacket]  
Gorani, my love, Gorani  
I know, my love, that you re longing for me.

Gorani, Gorani, my beloved Gorani...

Alashkhert is the name of a valley on the northeastern edge of the region of Daron. Fertile valleys like Alashkhert, formed by rivers and dried-out lakes, were settled since the 8th century BCE thanks to extensive irrigation systems. The surrounding mountainous terrain protected the inhabitants from invasion, encouraged self-sufficiency, and nurtured a sense of insularity reflected in the different dialects spoken in each of the valleys.

Tom Bozigian describes the movements of **Daronee** as ‘emotional gestures stemming from wars and suffering.’ According to Tineke van Geel, the dance **Gorani**, on which **Daronee** is based, is still found in Daron, Sassoon and Shatakh. In the Middle Ages, Gorani was a love song. Now, different versions of Gorani usually refer to sad events such as a poor harvest or lost love. **Daronee** is still in the State Ensemble’s repertoire.

In the Armenian capital of Yerevan, choreographic schools and dance ensembles aim to preserve folk dance traditions in a format suitable for stage presentation. The stage versions can be quite different from the original village dance forms, and state ensembles are sometimes blamed as agents of destruction of the ‘real’ traditional dancing. While dances do change when adapted for performance, it is worth bearing in mind that because so much Armenian traditional dance and music was tragically obliterated as a result of the massacres and diaspora, the survival of these arts in any form is something to celebrate. In any case, like all folk dance, Armenian folk dance is part of a living tradition which has changed a great deal and will continue to change, absorbing new influences and itself influencing others.

### Dances of Greater Armenia

There are other dances, mainly danced closely linked together, which I think of as being from ‘Greater Armenia’, that is, from the territory which used to be Armenian and where dances and music reveal an Armenian influence, even though the dances might be called Turkish, Kurdish, or Assyrian. Examples include **Agir Govenk** from Bitlis, the Kurdish **Bablakhans** and **Halays** from Van and parts of Kurdistan, **Tulum Havasi** from the Eastern Caucasus, and the Assyrian dance **Zaroura**.

Kurds were a strong minority in the former Armenian territory, and there are a number of dances which Armenians identify as their own Armenian, in which Kurdish influence is particularly apparent: **Khumkhuma**, **Papooree**, **Teen** and **Halay**, for example. Danced in close linked-arm formation, these are known as ‘pert’ (‘fortress’) or ‘bahd’ type dances. ‘Bahd’, meaning ‘wall’ in Armenian, is linked linguistically to ‘bahr’, meaning ‘dance’. And ‘Halay’ comes from the word ‘alay’, meaning ‘many people’. These close-together dances could be said to reflect the defensive nature of a constantly subjugated people, as well as the community solidarity which the dancing relies upon and reinforces.

Bianca de Jong suggests that dances belong to a place as well as to a people, and that as civilisations and cultures come and go, something of the dances remains in the land that nurtured them. My own experience – of all folk dance really, but Armenian dance in particular – is that what happens in the feet, *how* the feet feel the ground they dance upon, is very important. The dances of Greater Armenia speak to my feet the way the Armenian ones do, telling a story of lost land and enduring life. Dances such as the Assyrian **Zaroura** and the Kurdish **Bablakhan**, for example, are danced linked tightly in a line. With each repetition of the dance sequence, we travel very little. With each beat, we touch or step on the ground right beneath us, affirming again and again that where we stand right now, in the body and in the present moment, is home. Both Assyrians and Kurds have preserved their ethnic identity without a homeland, perhaps because in dances like these, the homeland comes to life beneath the feet of the dancer.

The beautiful harvest dance **Tulum Havasi** tells the story, through movement, of our dependence on fertile land to sustain life. **Tulum Havasi** is not Armenian, but its place of origin, the eastern Caucasus mountains, is just to the northeast of the present-day Armenian republic, and its message is still relevant to the unfolding story of the civilisations that have flourished and faded in that part of the world.

### Diaspora Dances

In the 1940s and 50s, second- and third-generation Armenian-Americans began to create a whole new repertoire of dances to replace what had been lost in the diaspora, by combining traditional and newly choreographed steps with older folk melodies and songs. A good example is **Eench Eemanaee**, also known as the **Armenian Misirlou**. It evolved from a combination of the Greek Misirlou which was enormously popular in the USA in the 1950s, and the traditional Armenian dance **Lourke Lourke** (a.k.a. **Sirdes**, ‘my heart’), which was brought from Daron, near Lake Van. The words to **Eench Eemanaee**, like many Armenian songs, tell a story of lost love as a metaphor for the lost homeland: ‘From the very day that you left, I became bitter toward life / And even the flowers cried and were sad with me / If only, my love, you had returned...’ The music to these ‘new’ dances is often characteristically ‘bright’ as a result of having been recorded in recent decades by Armenian-American orchestras, and they nearly always go to the right, a sign that they are dances of celebration. (Dances that move principally to the left tend to be more melancholy, according to Naira Kilichyan and Tineke van Geel.) **Siroon Aghchig** (**Sweet Girl**), **Ambee Dageets** (**Armenian Turn**), **Armenian Shuffle** and **Guhneega** are some popular dances recreated in the diaspora. These now-familiar dances have a particularly poignant message about the endurance and importance of dance traditions. I find it profoundly inspiring that even when a people, culture, and homeland is as comprehensively devastated as was Armenia, what was destroyed can be put back together by its survivors – not as it was, but in a new way.

Originally, this creative flexibility in all its forms was part of a conscious effort to allow new life to rise, like the phoenix, from the ashes of the land laid waste by attempted genocide.

This same brave creativity inspired the Soviet-Armenian composer Khachatur Avedissian to write his *Oratorium in Memory of the Victims of the Armenian Genocide of 1915*, a modern composition using traditional Armenian instruments and melodies. The Oratorium's third movement, *Berceuse*, is based on a traditional lullaby, and its beauty moved me to create the dance **Shoror**. Although I do not have Armenian ancestry, I believe that the consequences of genocide affect all members of the human family, and that ritual acts of healing can be everyone's responsibility. Given the precedent of the creativity with which Armenia's scattered children have responded to the loss in this century of so much of their music, dance and other art, as well as the loss of so many lives, it felt appropriate to arrange this dance, combining traditional Armenian *shoror* steps along with my own choreography.

*Shoror* (to sway') is linked linguistically to *oror* ('to rock or cradle'). The subtle swaying of the hands, tracing the infinity symbol in the space in front of the heart, is a gesture of cradling new life which is reflected in the words of the lullaby: 'Night, light of the moon falling on your face / My love is always for you / May no evil hand reach you / You are my only hope, you are my innocent, noble little one / I will rock you with this lullaby / So that you will grow older quickly / And quickly become the flame in the hearth of your own home / You are my dream, my sun...'

We dance **Shoror** holding candles as for a vigil, to shine the light of awareness on what has been kept in obscurity, and to testify that we see and remember. The nurturing of life is affirmed again in our feet when we walk the infinity symbol out on the ground, each carrying our own little light into the darkness, in steps which echo the deportations and forced marches into the Syrian desert in 1915. Finally we come together, raising our light-filled hands in Avedissian's hopeful image of the diaspora from the sixth and final movement of the Oratorium, *Armenia with a thousand wings*.

Avedissian's music seems to touch the place in the human heart which hopes and grieves, and the candle dance **Shoror** has been welcomed with great feeling. In 1995, many circle dance groups in Europe and North America included it in their vigils or commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe. In May 1995, the very week of that anniversary, I taught *Shoror* along with other Armenian dances as well as Jewish and Gypsy dances, as part of a community music festival in a Christian church in Berlin. This was particularly significant given that, to quote Vahakn Dadrian,

Many see the lack of action and reaction following the Armenian genocide as a critical precedent for the ensuing Jewish Holocaust of World War II. Indeed, it has been reported that, in trying to reassure doubters of the morality and viability of his genocidal schemes, Hitler stated, 'Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?' (p. xix)

My own belief is that if we had all spoken of the annihilation of the Armenians, the Holocaust of World War Two might not have happened on so great a scale. I also feel that it may be our responsibility to remember and speak of them now. As hard as it is to acknowledge these horrors and our own feelings in the face of them, the act of bearing witness to the past is our only hope of making different choices in the present, and thereby safeguarding the future.

It can also be painful to acknowledge that all human beings have the capacity to initiate, or to participate in, persecution. The message encoded in dances such as *Shoror* and *Daronee* may be that we each are called to 'fight the battle of life' – which is not a war against our neighbours, but rather an inner struggle to keep alive the humane spark in ourselves and in

our communities that will refuse to collaborate with such events should they ever occur in our homelands, in our lifetimes.

Ultimately, if each of us has the capacity for cruelty and destruction, we all also have a reservoir of compassion and kindness, as well as the ability to choose. My own prayer is that an awareness of history – rather than spurring us to take sides in an old conflict – can help us to move beyond the vicious circle of blame, projection, retaliation, revenge, self-justification and its inevitable escalation.

Perhaps we can take heart from the thriving Armenians today, because after all, the attempted genocide failed. Armenian language, culture, dance, music, art, learning, and religion are alive and well today in many, many more places than can ever be destroyed. It is ironic, yet miraculous, that the actions intended to obliterate Armenian existence, eighty years later have thus helped to guarantee its survival.

War and suffering have continued to plague the Armenian republic, parts of which remain devastated by the massive earthquake of 1988 and many subsequent hardships, but the Armenian people have ensured their survival in the strong roots they have put down in all the places the winds of change have carried them. Continually nurtured by living artistic and cultural traditions, the vibrancy and resilience of these roots are a lesson to us all, and we are lucky to have these beautiful dances as our tools and our teachers.

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See also The Hidden Holocaust, BBC documentary film.

Gorani, a CD recorded in Armenia by Laura Shannon & Shakeh Avanesian in 2001 with the Shoghakn Ensemble, is available from Laura Shannon, [www.laurashannon.net](http://www.laurashannon.net)

The Oratorium in Memory of the Victims of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, by Khachatur Avedissian (SYNCOOP 5749 CD 106) is available from [www.syncoop.com](http://www.syncoop.com)

My grateful thanks go to Shakeh Avanesian, Eddie Djololian, Naira Kilichyan, Tom Bozgian, Gayane Afrikian, Susan & Gary Lind-Sinanian, Hasmeek and Aleksan Haroutounyan, Rudik Haroyan, Gagik Mekhitarian, Erik Bendix, Tineke van Geel, Bianca de Jong, Jan Knoppers, all those from whom I have learned Armenian dances as well as all those who generously welcomed and assisted me in Armenia.